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february 2002

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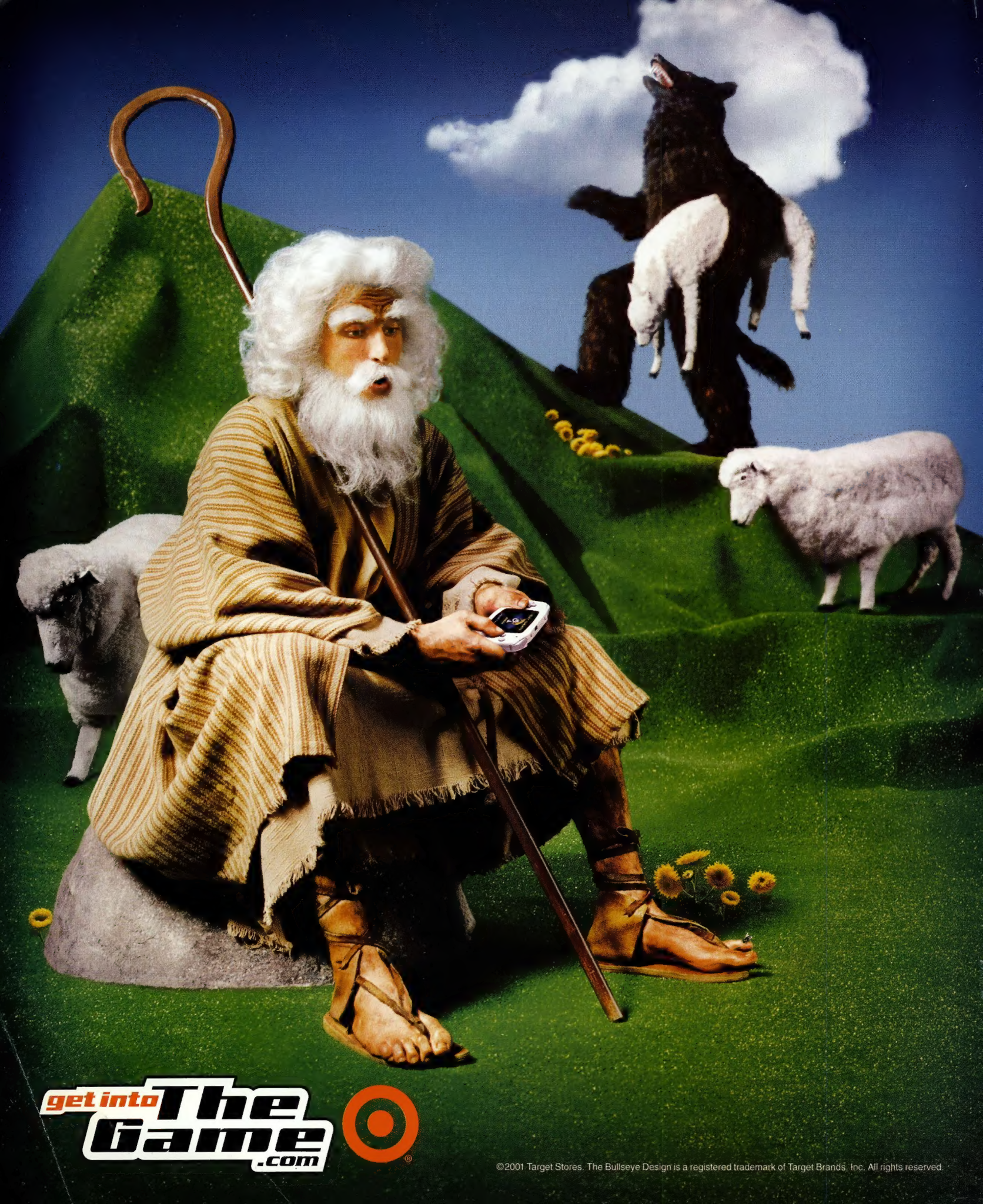

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GET INTO IT

I am particularly fond of this month's cover story. As a long-time gamer, I've waited earnestly for this moment in time. Having endured the incubation period of 3D gaming, seeing it finally find its legs, is one thing, but the advent of genuinely maturing themes as a by-product, well, that's progress.

I can remember writing volumes on why games like Mortal Kombat, with its spouting neck holes, shouldn't be censored (although it ultimately was on console while the arcade down the street continued to spurt blood), and, more recently, watching one of the coolest, albeit grizzly, PS fighters, Thrill Kill, get the axe due to its maniacal themes. Hell, I was waiting for action figures on that one.

"I can remember writing volumes on why games like Mortal Kombat, with its spouting neck holes, shouldn't be censored–while the arcade down the street continued to spurt blood"

Meanwhile, movies and TV continue to maintain a semblance of creative freedom (although opposition still rears its ugly and usually nonsensical head). It looks as if the double standard may finally be coming to an end for video games. The latest brick in the wall, for console, was GTA III–a major coo for Rockstar–and State of Emergency will follow, trumpeting our cries for equal opportunity gaming! While Rockstar is obviously leading the revolution, the success of these games will inevitably breed more, spawning a truly diverse market, and thus bring video games out of the bedroom and into the living room once and for all (unless of course you still like to play in the bedroom).

Another new gaming trend is forming on TV, with the announcement of G4 (see Ink this issue), an all-video-game-based 24-7 network. Backed by noteworthy TV and video game personalities, G4 further drives home the message that video games are fast becoming a part of mainstream American culture. Although FF tanked at the box office, it most likely did so because it wasn't based on the game. Looking at Tomb raider, and the buzz behind projects like Resident Evil (sources say it's good stuff) and the Richard Donner-directed Crazy Taxi, the tide is obviously turning.

DAVE HALVERSON, EDITOR IN CHIEF

忍者

鬼武者

Long ago, in the days of darkness and magic, a majestic hillside castle is surrounded for help. One lone swordsman, Samanosuke, rushes to her side, only to find she has the legion of demon warriors. Capcom's epic samurai adventure meets the power of the

MATURE
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CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Violence

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by power-hungry warlords. The noble Princess Yuki, fearing for her life, sends an urgent request
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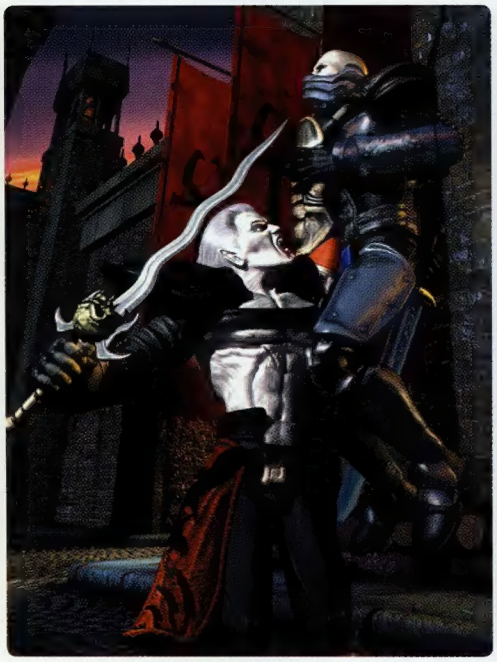
Core make the jump from female action hero to doop herder... we're cool with that.



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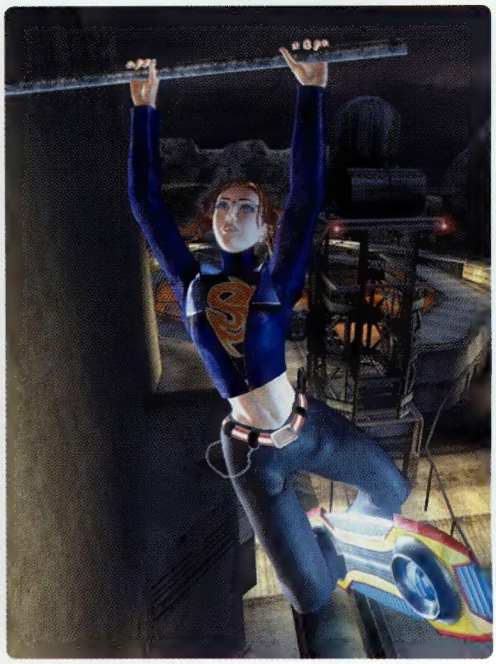

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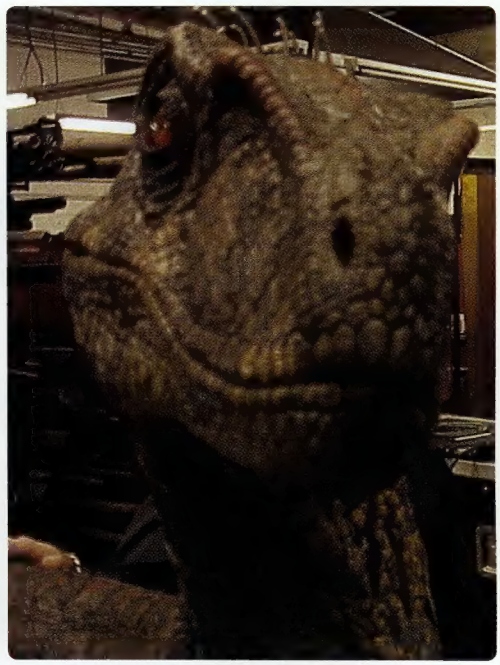

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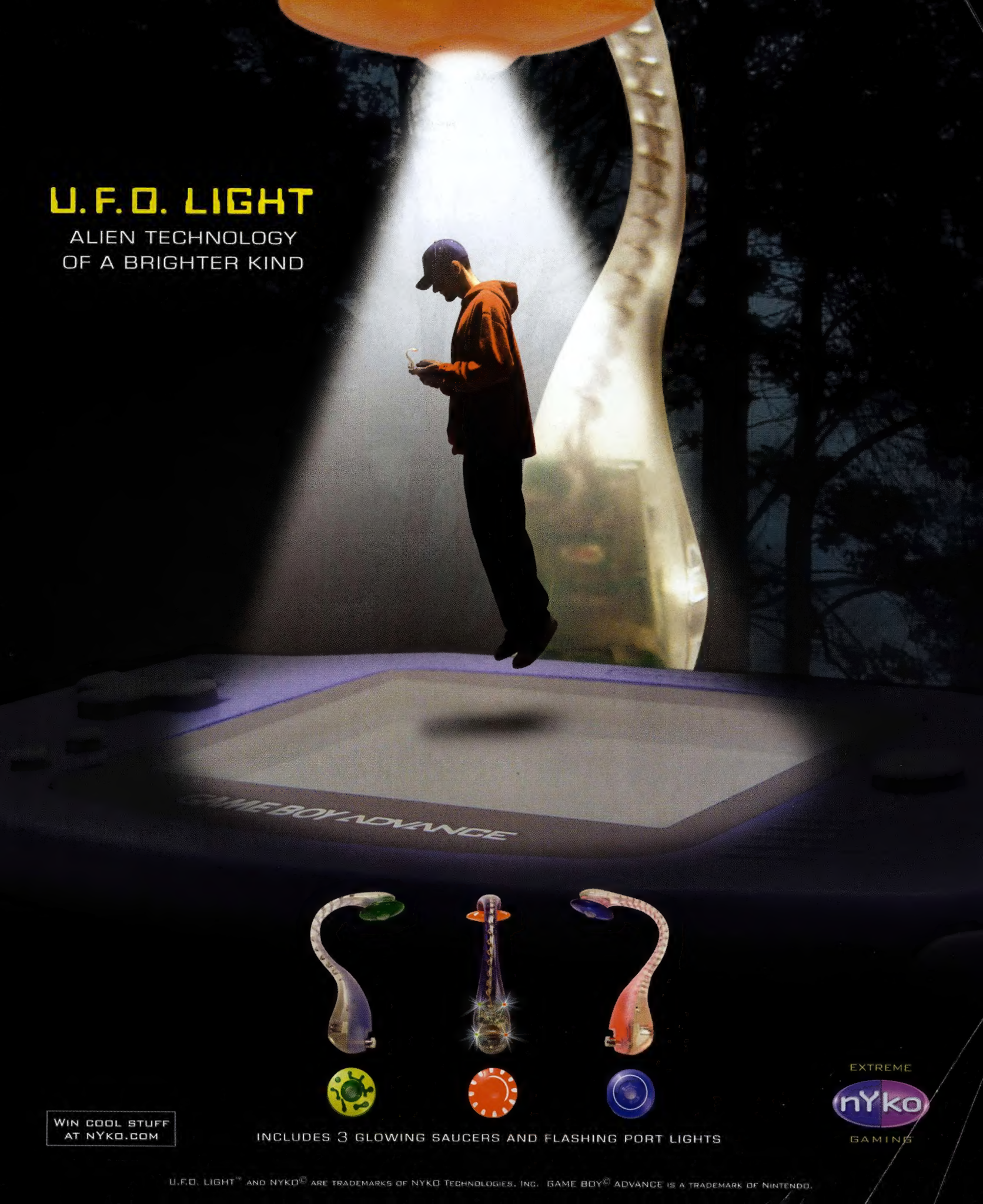
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edited by **play** magazine staff

YOU MAY NEVER SAY "THERE'S NOTHING ON TV" AGAIN

At Disney, Charles Hirschhorn broached primarily the children, teen and women's market; and during a stint as VP of Development at Fox, he developed *In Living Color* and executive produced *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*. With an eye on the future and the desire to move into gaming (due to its parallels with filmed entertainment), he's surrounded himself with a winning production team, 7 million Comcast Cable subscribers, and Insight Communications to help get the party started...

"G4 will air 24 hours a day, seven days a week."
-Charles Hirschhorn, G4 Network

So video games on TV may finally get its day in the sun. From where do you hail career-wise and what lead you to this project?
CH: Prior to starting G4, I was president of Walt Disney Television and Television Animation. As a former television producer and programming executive, I have watched the video game industry grow, not just in terms of money spent, but in the quality of gameplay, graphics, sophistication and players. I continue to be surprised that there is so little TV programming for gamers. Millions of gamers have contributed to an entertainment choice and lifestyle that deserve a TV network.
Will you be creating entirely original programming similar to MTV, or sign up independent shows?
CH: We plan to release our specific show plans in February, but it will be all original. Nothing rerun, repeated or repurposed. We're developing 13 weekly series that fall into two camps:
1) genre specific shows with news, information, cheats, interviews, etc. about sports, action, RPG, etc.
2) lifestyle entertainment shows (game shows, talk show, comedy shows, scripted show) focusing on games.
Where will the bulk of your studio material be shot?
CH: In Los Angeles.
How many hours a day will G4 be on the air?
CH: G4 will air 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
Will you have something similar to VJs? If so, celebs or new faces?
CH: We are currently casting hosts who we will introduce as part of our February programming announcement. They will probably be new personalities with authentic game experience.
Who are you targeting?
CH: Our core demographic is men 18-34 and teens 12-17. G4 needs the hardcore gamers' support to succeed, but as a 24/7 television network, we plan to offer a variety of programming which will appeal to all levels of gamers, from hardcore to those simply curious.
How many markets will you be in when you kick things off?
CH: It's a little early to tell. We're in discussion with all the major cable and satellite operators nationwide.
Might we see a *Real World* based on a group of crazed gamers? (count me in if that's in the works)
CH: I look forward to your audition.
Translating the cool factor of gaming—a very personal experience to the TV screen has always been difficult. It seems tough to appear pure in a mainstream format. How will you bridge the gap?
CH: We hope to involve lots of game developers and gamers in our programming. Their commitment to the authentic gaming experience will help shape our shows.
Will G4 touch on converging markets like toys, movies and other forms of branding?
CH: Only as it relates to games.
Who will decide what you showcase in terms of reviewing/covering games and the people who make them? Will it be decided by the quality of the game, the buzz, the Hollywood factor?
CH: We have a large program development group which is working with all members of the game community (publishers, developers, manufacturers, retailers, magazines, websites, etc.) as well as TV producers and other gamers to help make programming decisions.
Have the Big 3 been responsive in terms of interest? How about third party support. Are the companies ready for the jump to TV?
CH: Because we are trying to compliment the efforts by game developers, publishers and hardware manufacturers, as well as magazines, web sites and retailers, I would say that across the board, everyone has been very supportive of our efforts.
Will you work with the industry press to create and promote shows?
CH: Absolutely. Our ambition is to compliment all the existing forms of game media. We hope to work with all the major game websites and print media to help them boost their circulation, traffic and brand awareness. **play**

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ebay ODDITY OF THE MONTH

Why pay $49.99 for GTA III when you can purchase the "uncensored" version with the "giant fold out city map" included on ebay for just... $80? Truth is, it's the same game. Aren't ebay cons fun? While you're at it, may as well pick up Ninja Gaiden for Mega Drive and Castlevania for Dreamcast!
It'll certainly be sold by the time you read this, but maybe it'll come back around for the next lucky sucker, I mean collector.

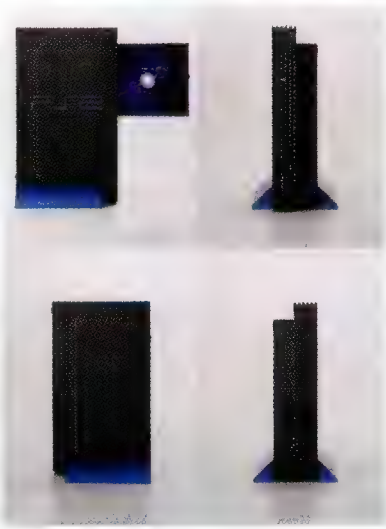
FOR SALE: ONE HOT DR. AND A FILM STUDIO

After recouping only about a third of the $135 million *Final Fantasy* film, *The Spirits Within*, Square has entered into talks to sell their Honolulu-based movie making unit to *South Park* creators Matt—no, just kidding—to an undisclosed U.S. company. Square president Yoichi Wada said that, ideally, Square would maintain a minority stake in the studio and continue to do some film work, if only as a secondary partner or contractor. Wada became president after Hisashi Suzuki stepped down, taking responsibility for the company's lousy bid at a blockbuster feature film. If only they'd have given us a call, we could have told them, a *Final Fantasy* movie not based on any of the games... well, that's not really a *Final Fantasy* movie. As much as we all love Dr. Aki Ross, she's no Lulu. On a positive note, 125 employees of the 220 that worked at the studio are collaborating on a second project with another studio. Let's hope it's more than loosely based on one of Square's amazing games this time.

COMICS GO TO WAR

Since September 11, we rarely stopped to think about the men and women who [illegible] But ever since cave boy lost control of his jihad, it's been a different story. [illegible] getting little bit from the front lines (well, the Persian Gulf). CrossGen [illegible] received a ship-to-shore phone call from the Nimitz class aircraft carrier the U.S.S. Theodore Roosevelt, stationed in the Persian Gulf. Turns out many of the [illegible] American lads (as well as avid gamers), we imagine their AA battery stash [illegible] they'll be pone for awhile, they asked if the publisher could send some [illegible] CrossGen, in a move befitting these patriotic times, sent over 1000 comic books and the original posters signed by the entire staff. Maybe they'll stop a couple [illegible] and share them with the Taliban.

SONY SAILS



Sony recently reported that sales of their PlayStation brand have exceeded expectations despite current economic conditions. Not only did they double their competition's numbers during Thanksgiving weekend, selling 317,000 PS2s and 100,000 PS one consoles during the week of November 19, but PS2 sales rose 62% from the week prior (they should send a big gift basket to Solid Snake, don't you think?). The following week things continued to go Sony's way, selling another 321,000 units, including another 100,000 PS ones. (What, are they finally bringing out *Hermie Hopperhead* or something?) PlayStation category sales are on target to surpass the one billion mark during December 2001. Overall, for 2001, they expect that two-out-of every-three dollars spent on consoles will land in their pockets, allowing them to buy Microsoft and Nintendo, elect Parappa as President and dance all the way to the bank.

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RETAIL TALES AND DC DREAMS

The console wars are officially back on. Although Sony is well ahead of the pack (see pg. 14), Nintendo reports selling 600,000 GameCubes in the first 15 days at retail, while Microsoft sold nearly 400,000 Xbox units in the first week and 200,000 the next, totaling 556,000—setting the big green newcomer slightly behind Mario, er, we mean *Pikmin*, and the gang. One can only imagine how cube sales would be if Mario was in the house. But here's the real shocker: Since Sega dropped the Dreamcast down to $50, they've moved 200,000 additional units. Someone needs to get with the program and bring us some more games (I know *Langrisser* is still waiting for a suitor over in Japan). For all of you devotees and new users out their, here's a list of Dreamcast sleepers to help keep the dream alive: *Super Magnetic Neo*—3D platformer heaven; *Red Dog*—Argonaut's gift to the DC, an action-driving masterpiece; *Heavy Metal 2000*—arena fighting from the power trio of Simon Bisley, Kevin Eastman and Capcom; *Draconus*—medieval thrills from Treyarch; and *Max Steele*, their follow-up—more straight action, but pretty cool.

'THAT'S OKAY, I HAD A BIG LAUNCH'

In a launch befitting a company that out-grosses most states, Microsoft, in just three weeks, shipped 1.1 million units to North American retailers. The sell-in results, according to sources at Edelman Public Relations, build on the spectacular Xbox sell-through rate for the system's first two weeks of launch. Xbox games have also been selling in record numbers, with most gamers buying several games with their console purchase. According to the report, the most popular games to date include *Halo, Project Gotham, NFL Fever 2002, Dead or Alive 3, Madden NFL 2002* and *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2X*. In a related story, Munch was overheard saying, "To hell with your press release. I'd like to see any of them shock enemies with their brains." According to Dan Dematteo, president of GameStop Inc., "Xbox has driven tens of thousand of gamers into our stores." And if you've ever seen how much space there is in Babbage's, you've got to appreciate that. How do they do it, when Sony and Nintendo can't, you ask? Most Xboxes are made at the giant Flextronics, a hi-tech factory located in Mexico. At any given time, trucks are coming and going loaded with Xboxes bound for the U.S. Without Flextronics, there wouldn't be an Xbox,. Their ability to manufacture it green-lit the project, so the next time you play *Halo*, say, "Yo Caro, Flextronics."

THE LIGHT STUFF

Nyko's lighting technology for portable gaming (that's a GameBoy light to you and me) has been granted its fourth patent, making them the reigning king of portable gaming lights. Technically, they could sue the sun. In turn, Nyko can now turn its legal team fighting lawsuits to making cool new gizmo's to hook onto game systems again. Since the introduction of the Worm Light in late '98, Nyko has been fighting to protect their cash cow products. Specifically, the patent provides protection against any game lighting device that utilizes use of power from the system to illuminate the screen, using a bulb or LED, flexible arms, light adjustability, diffusers or magnifiers. In other words, if you're in the business of illuminating GameBoy screens, it's time to sell the farm. Our Super Headband Light does, however, remain safe and sound.

GAMERS FUEL

We've all got to eat some time, and if you're like us you need a good box to read! New from the breakfast wizards at Kellogg's, Homer's Donut Cereal (think cinnamon-sugar AppleJack's with sugar...did we mention the sugar?) and Bart's Peanut Butter Chocolate Crunch, should do the trick.
But if you really are what you eat does that mean... Doh!

PlayStation®2

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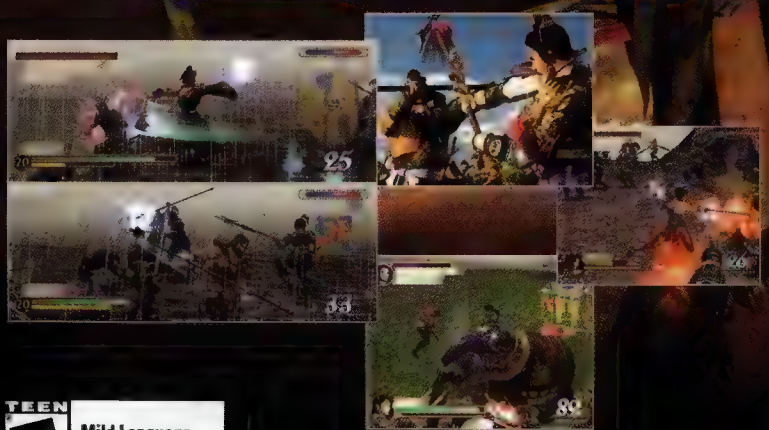

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TEEN T Mild Language Violence

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GAME DIVAS: CHICKS THAT PLAY... GAMES

Like it or not, boyz, in steadily increasing numbers, females are piercing the vale of our game sanctuary. Sure, it'll be weird talking to your woman about driving the assault vehicle in *Halo* or having her kick your ass at racing games, but look on the bright side: No more whining about how expensive games are! She'll forget about The Limited and shop with you at EB and Babbage's instead. Action movie-loving girls can't be far off. Tali Fischer, Public Relations Representative for Thrustmaster, has made it her life's ambition (well, one of 'em) to round up these girls and find out what makes them tick, via Game Divas at Thrustmaster.com. We'll sacrifice, er, talk to one each month until they enslave our race and steal our consoles.

Shelby (right, in red) and friend

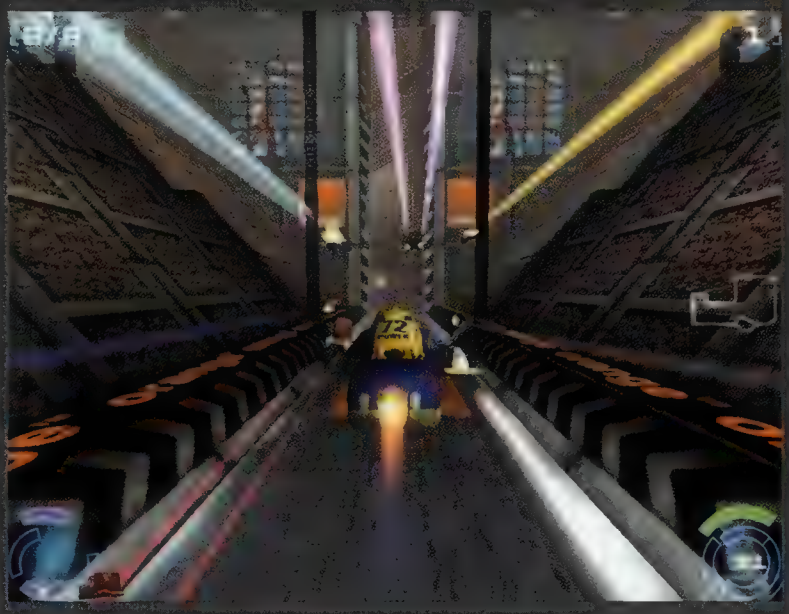
Tali Fischer hard at work

This week I am introducing you to my pal, Shelby Masterman. Nickelodeon Games and Sports' Secret Gaming Weapon! Shelby is definitely one of my favorite people to work with because she is all about videogame enthusiasm. So take a look at what she has to say and remember to drop me an e-mail at gameDiva@thrustmaster.com if you have any questions for Shelby that I didn't get to. By the way... I'm still waiting for those pictures of game dudes dressed up as game Divas. -Tali

How did you get into doing stuff about video games?
When I was hired, I jumped headfirst into the video game world.
Why did Nickelodeon Games and Sports decide to do a show on video games?
Because there's so much more to games than tips and secrets. We wanted to show kids the stuff about games that they wouldn't normally know just by sitting down and playing.
What kind of stuff do you look for when deciding what to put on the video game show?
We try and feature anything that's fun and interesting.
What is your favorite video game?
Dave Mirra 2 by Acclaim.
What is your favorite kind of accessory?
Snowboard for the PS2.
(Note from the Diva: Can I casually mention that Thrustmaster makes one of those? The FreeStyler Board to be precise.)
Who is the best-looking video game character out there?
Shaun Palmer.
How much fun did you have hanging out with Tali (the Diva herself) when she visited you in NYC?
(Shameless self-promotion.)
I loved it! I hope we can do it again...
(Note from Tali: I love Shelby. She is the best thing since sliced bread!)
What is the first system you ever owned? First game?
Atari 2600. *Pole Position.*
Would you ever dress like Lara Croft in public?
No way. Maybe Vikki from *Portal Runner*, though!
What advice do you have for people out there who want to write about video games/high tech or get involved in your line of work?
Don't be afraid to try a game that you think looks hard. If you die, you can always restart.
What video game would you most like to see turned into a movie? What about a movie-turned-videogame?
Spyhunter (video game to movie). *The Usual Suspects* (movie to video game).
What do you feel about women and the video game industry?
There needs to be more! Men take it way too seriously. It's entertainment, after all. Also, if more women would work in the industry, it would trickle down and get little girls to start kicking their brother's butts in games. There needs to be more games geared towards girls aged 10 and above.
If you had a game about your life, what would it be called (note: being that Shelby lives in NYC; I will not allow her to use *Crazy Taxi*!)?
Either *Adventures Underground* or *Dodge the Terrorists*, depends on the month.
Anything else you want us to know?
You guys should patent a keyboard that plugs into an Xbox for the music creator games. **play**

FLY ME TO LEELU

Apparently here in the States we're not good enough for Wipeout Fusion and NY Cab (shown below), based on The Fifth Element. While both games are out for the PS2 in the UK, neither is on the U.S. radar...yet. Although SCEA has not picked up Wipeout Fusion, something tells us we'll be seeing both games very soon.

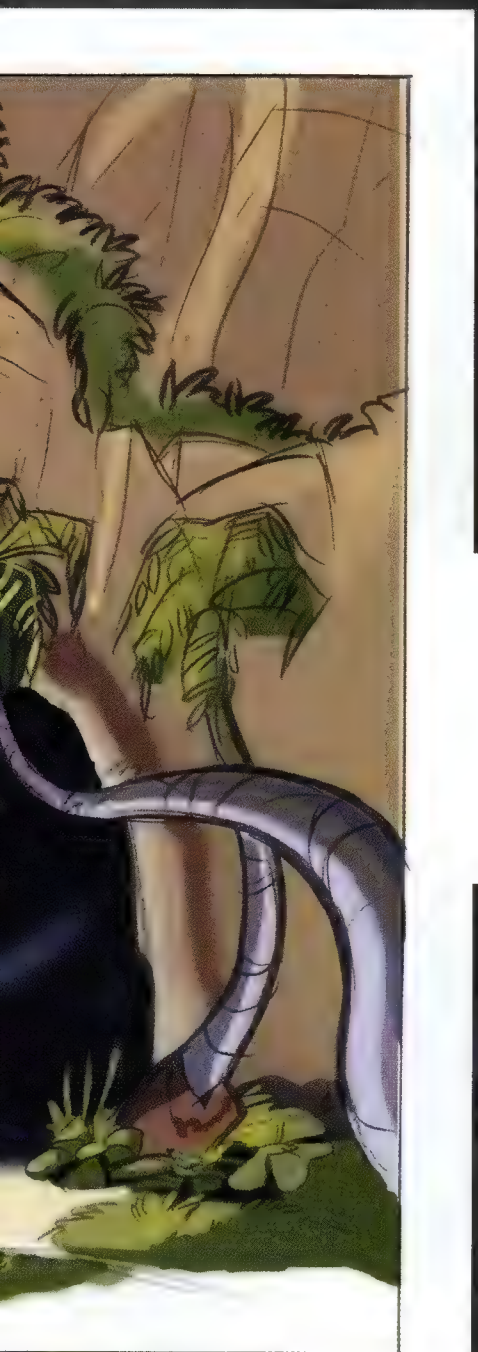


THIS GAME BITES!

Just after going to press with our *Bloodlust* coverage last month, we received word of the game's official title: *BloodRayne*. As fate would have it, just as we went to press with this issue, we received these new in-game screenies along with enough info on the game to wallpaper the office. The whole Nazi vibe comes into play when the nitwits flee to South America after WW1 in search of some occult power they intend to use to reclaim their glory. Twenty years and three ancient artifacts later, it looks like Hans and the boys are about to make like popsicles and get sucked. When agent BloodRayne drinks enough living blood, she enters an intensely violent state called Bloodlust, where she does much more damage. Drink even more and she goes into Bloodrage. Sounds inviting. Her supernatural abilities, which increase throughout the game, include incredible speed, inhuman agility, enhanced vision senses, the ability to "slow time" (à la *The Matrix*), and more. The slow motion feature allows for automatic slow motion camera panning when spectacular events like dismemberment or explosions occur! Yippee! The camera can also be triggered to follow any projectile to its target. *BloodRayne* promises to be both horror and action filled—and, of course, she's sexy as all hell.

NEWSBYTES

"Turn on the fun" should be tuned to the more appropriate slogan, "Turn up the profits." **Best Buy** reported third quarter sales jumped up **27%** to **$4.76 billion**, mainly due to the popularity of video game and home entertainment hardware and software . . . That little niche called **anime** is breaking out of its shell. This year, **one out of every 12 DVDs** released was import animation from Japan. **Pioneer** leads the industry, cataloging **253 titles**. **ADV Films** is in second place with **117 discs** . . . **Luc Besson** is infected with sequelitis. If **Natalie Portman** commits, the French director, famous for the sci-fi extravaganza *The Fifth Element*, will reportedly move forward with a follow-up to his 1994 film, *The Professional* . . . The fate of the "special edition" is now at the hands of celebrity greed. Muscle man Arnold Schwarzenegger was paid **$75,000** for his work on supplemental portions of the *Total Recall* DVD. But studios won't be able to afford payroll for such add-ons if the trend continues, say studio sources. **75 grand** for a two hour audio commentary? Come on Ahnuld, Maria got you pushing to many pencils? . . . The sequel to *X-Men* is scheduled to begin filming in May 2002 with all the principle crew returning, including director **Bryan Singer**. Though, it won't be called *X-Men 2*—it's been officially labeled *X* by Fox executives . . . **Warner Bros.** just snagged the domestic distribution rights to *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*. With a $160 million budget and Arny attached to the project (for a cool $30 mil), the film is set for a July 2003 release . . . A **DVD-RW recorder** is currently slated for a January release in Japan. Co-developers **Pioneer** and **Sharp** have agreed upon a **$833 retail price** and will produce **30,000 decks monthly** . . . Siena Heights University is welcoming **Bart Simpson** as faculty. This winter, the school is offering students a two-credit class called "**Animated Philosophy and Religion**," tapping into the pop culture pipeline to discuss how religion is portrayed in TV and film . . . **Team Ninja**, the talented Tecmo development staff behind **Dead or Alive 3** has revealed that they are hard at work on an Xbox sports title, either tennis or soccer . . . In a rather less than inspired move, Square Japan has decided to release **Final Fantasy X International** in Japan. The game will feature the U.S. dub and Japanese subtitles. Hmmm. Better however is the so-called privilege disc which will contain a new scenario called Eternal Nagi Paragraph and interview with the game's producer . . . The rumors of **SNK**'s death have been greatly exaggerated, it would seem. The much beloved Japanese maker of such classic games as The King of Fighters and Magician Lord live on as **SNK Neo Geo**, now headquartered in Korea. One of the new company's first priorities will be to stem the growing tide of bootleg SNK titles in Asia . . .



The Grotto

EVOLUTION

story by dave halverson

Rockstar is on the frontlines in the war against censorship as it pertains to video games. With the public and the industry at their back, the opposition is finally starting to fade...we hope.

There was a time when movie violence consisted of a single gun shot, the victim clasping his wound and uttering those exhausting last words. There was also a time when porn was shown in theatres to the small niche audience brave enough to walk below the marquee: "One please. And a towel." But as time marches on in America, demand equals progress—and profits—and soon enough, Americans get what they want, be it entertainment, the press, buying an UZI... That's the beauty of democracy. Video games are currently crossing that threshold, going from a consumable once regarded as a child's toy—even though that's never really been the case—to a form of mainstream entertainment for all ages.

Of course, all of this comes at a price. There are those who would abuse these rights (see Jerry Springer any day of the week), and allow materials of an extreme nature to fall into the wrong hands. When tragedy ensues, these cases are presented as the norm, and we all suffer the consequences. Regarding video games, this usually equates to the Doom syndrome. Whenever a troubled youth finally snaps (likely after repeated Oprah exposure), as soon as the bedroom PC or console is spotted, every news organization in the country whips out the old 15-frames-per-second Doom footage. Without ranting on about the obvious problems with this argument, I'll give you my two cents and then move on to the game that will replace Doom as gaming's latest and greatest evil doer, and why it won't deserve that stigma any more than Doom did.

Give me games or give me death!

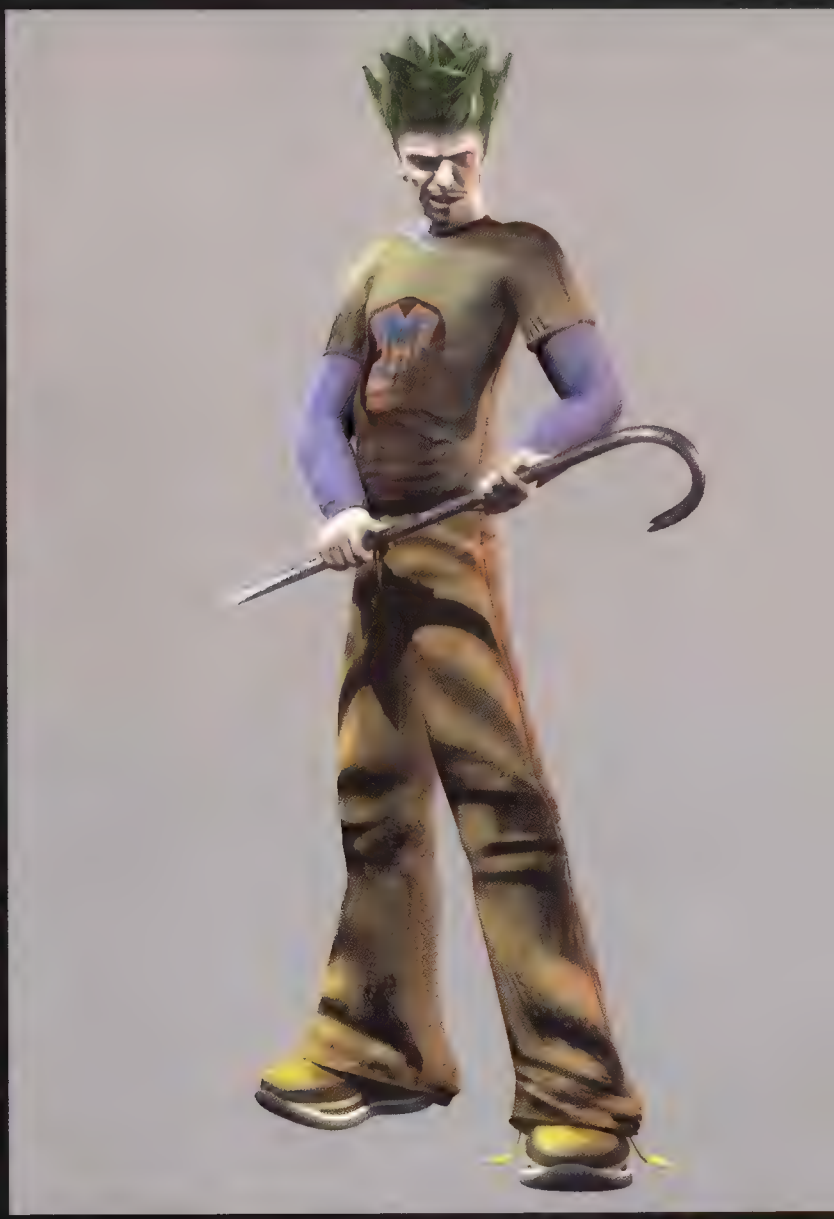
Like movies and video games, guns, sex, booze, cigs, and everything else we hold dear all have their place—and regulations imposed to protect those not ready to see, shoot, partake, drink, or otherwise use them. Film and TV, for instance, now have an effective rating system, when properly supervised and implemented. And now games have one too. So problem solved, right? We can never guarantee that some jackass somewhere won't hand his five-year-old the controller and let him mow-down pedestrians and send heads a-flying, thus creating the next Jason; just as we can't predict that the same jackass without video games wouldn't find some other way to corrupt Junior. This is where society, and the good Senator, need to focus their attention. Dealing with larger issues, like education, health care (especially mental health care) and poverty, will surely assure a future with far less incidents of troubled youth. The truth is, a vast majority of video games are about teamwork, overcoming obstacles, fantasy, racing, and just having fun in the privacy of your own home. It fosters creativity, imagination and is the springboard to many lucrative and satisfying careers. Better to get hooked on games and become a programmer than on sex to become a porn star... wait, er, maybe...

The State of State of Emergency

I see State of Emergency (and GTA III, for that matter) as a turning point in many ways—the evidence that gaming really is growing up. Like Hollywood, there actually will be games designed specifically for a mature audience, thus opening the door to directorial and creative talent currently outside our realm. Sure, we have countless first-person shooters and games like Kingpin, but I'm talking about a whole new level of mature content. Imagine a hot babe with a perfect ass standing at the end of a street with, say, a hundred people milling about, robbing, looting and generally going nuts (all in the name of freedom, of course). Grabbing the nearest weapon, say, an AK 47, she lets loose, strafing and firing. As heads pop into the sky, blood sprays, and countless victims—many headless—fall to their knees and die in a pool of their own blood. remaining there for the duration of the level. You can come back five minutes later, launch a grenade into the pile, and flip them like human pancakes. Now, before you go running to find the Lieberman chat group on Google, let me explain what State is really all about.

"Rising up against an oppressive faction is the American way. Doing it with guns and bats just makes it quicker" -Me

"SoE fills the fun gap for adult gamers! It provides the context and freedom to sit back, turn off reality and have a bloody good laugh. Enjoy"
-Rockstar producer
ROCKET BURGER
100 GM BEEF BURGERS
PROPANE



If you're going to lay waste to a city, you might as well dress for the occasion. Libra, an attorney with an axe to grind, grinds it.

Although you can wreak all that havoc, it's not necessarily what the game is all about. It's more of an arcade-action game than a cold-blooded murder simulation: it's a virtual riot, and you realize this the moment you begin playing. Imagine Smash TV in a 3D perspective and it begins to come into focus. The game is hinged on a plot where an oppressive faction, the American Trade Organization (ATO), is clamping down on the "organized resistance" and restricting movement across the city to counter the spread of the revolt. As an operative in the revolution (in the Revolution Mode), you're fighting against The Man in the name of freedom, within four massive city hubs—the Capitol City Mall, Chinatown, East Side, and Corporation Central—in over 175 missions. The scope of each hub is mind boggling. I spent over two hours in the Capitol City Mall completing only 50% of the level, and was constantly wowed by what I was experiencing. Once you get over what you're seeing on the surface—vast, realistic areas packed with people and fine detail—and dig into the mission, you start to notice that within the massive crowds, people are actually reacting to given situations: cowering, stopping to look, looting, or just running for their lives. This dynamic atmosphere gives you the sensation, amidst all of the hysteria, that you're fully immersed in the struggle. Wimps shiver and cower at your feet, while the local gangs, like the 3rd Street Killaz and Jade Hill, standing their ground, say, "Bring it on." It's remarkable. The actual assignments, dispensed from a home base within each given area and often linked into several parts, range from escorting key revolution operatives to bomb disposal (and detonation) to picking up and delivering sensitive material to silencing ATO operatives. If you fail a given mission (each of which only spans a few minutes), by reporting back to home base you can simply try it again from the beginning of that mission. There's no going back to the beginning of the level, and I can't express how happy I am that the levels aren't timed. It's obvious that VIS knows one thing very, very well, and that's how to keep a game moving, and fun. This game is like a drug—only cheaper and safer: it's addictive, and a non-stop joy to play. I could see myself going back to the arcades again to play a game like this over and over, but now, I don't have to.

The gameplay possesses the moves and control to support the manic premise. The camera is perfectly locked on and can be spun around in an instant behind the player. The fighting is fast and furious and easy to grasp, with an emphasis on exaggeration. Once a foe is down, he's not necessarily out (look for the puddle), so you can rapidly and repeatedly stomp him to death with the press of a button. And, yes, it's funny: the way the body flops and spurts…well, I guess you have to be there. Whether you're shooting, beating, zapping, or fighting hand to hand, the action is seamless and almost illegally satisfying.

In State's Chaos Mode, the goal is to rack up points to unlock new characters and, more importantly, levels, such as the spectacular Last Man Standing (more on that later). This is the Smash TV-like portion of State that I referred to earlier, and it's not all about killing; it's about points. Like Smash TV, an announcer chimes in throughout the level, prompting you on the most effective way to gain or loose points. If you hear "civilian penalty!" the goal

becomes to not kill any civilians while the rule is in effect. Instead, you're directed to blow up cars, kill looters, smash windows, kill the ATO, etc. Sure, it's really all about mass destruction, but it's presented in a colorful, comically manic way. The game is not dark at all—like Kingpin, for instance—but rather adrenaline fueled and highly exaggerated. This is the evolution of the beat-'em-up, pure and simple, just as Jak and Daxter is the evolution of action-adventure. In Chaos Mode, each time you reach a score milestone, beginning at 100,000, another is imposed, and you just keep rockin' until you blow it. The replayability here? Off the charts. And then there's the Last Man Standing mode, which I found almost too much fun. I began laughing uncontrollably several times each and every time I played it. I may just be a sick puppy, but I've never felt anything quite as, dare I say, satisfying. The goal here is to simply kill everybody in as little time as possible. Two hundred people—run for your lives! When it's all over (what a mess), the announcer gleefully exclaims, "Congratulations! You killed everybody!" The scene I described at the beginning of this article—that's Last Man Standing. Chasing down the last man (or woman) alive, well, let's just say it is what you make of it.

There's much to be said about the characters in State as well; there are six, each with distinct attributes and background stories, the one common thread being that they're all fed up with the ATO. My money's on Libra, an attorney in a skin-tight mini with perfect boobs, and Hector Soldado, aka Spanky, an ex-gang member who obviously likes to hit the chili fries every chance he gets. The models are superb and the animation depicts each in such a way that you never tire of guiding them through the mayhem. Spanky waddles to and fro in a carefree, comical manner, butt crack proudly in view, and Libra is just plain hot. I'll be first in line to buy her action figure. Honestly, I can do without the others, although there's an individual here to suit every taste: big brawler, geek, wise guy—equal opportunity killing machines at your disposal.

Killer technology

Built on VIS' proprietary Kaos engine, State of Emergency is a technical wonder. The game maintains a constant 30 frames per second while exhibiting detailed textures, models, explosions, lighting, transparencies, and other assorted special effects among screens with up to 100 people going ape shit. The collision detection alone is unthinkable, not to mention the AI, which is surprisingly realistic. It's far and away the most impressive visual feet I've seen in terms of action onscreen. So how'd they do it? Specifically, the renderers were written before the engine, setting the limitations before they began, and the character and animation renderer are hardware coded. General crowd members are low poly as opposed to cops and gangs, which look markedly better. The CPU has no involvement with the renderer, so it can render the environments very quickly. The majority of data entering the renderer is at a stage where it's almost ready to go straight to DMA (meaning the character and vector data is already organized). The AI uses 65% of the CPU while the main processing and rendering works off of VU1. Ah hell, it's dual processing, and a lot of hard work! State contains 16,000 frames of animation, all hand animated based on skeletal animation. The main characters are skinned and have 250 specific animations, some containing 100 frames or more. The grunts are segmented and comprised of 28 parts. Beyond that there's dynamic texture management (256 color palletized for each set of textures) packed into video memory, particle effects, dynamic culling, and 64 of 128 sound effects playing at once. What does all this mean? It means that late Jan/early Feb, if you're old enough to buy it, you're in for one helluva ride.

Words and even screens cannot begin to tell the story regarding this game's visuals. Little moments that you will experience based on the way you play need to be seen to be believed. It's a big, living, breathing pool of insanity with you right in the center. You want escapism? State of Emergency redefines it.

Parting Shot

If, for some strange reason, State of Emergency causes a stir and there's even a hint that it will be neutered or hindered in any way—revolt! I mean it. State of Emergency is an important milestone in the evolution of gaming. Like Hollywood, we deserve and have earned the right to experience new ideas. How are we to ever attract a David Lynch, Oliver Stone, Tim Burton, or Jon Woo to our craft if there are strict limitations binding it, due to the mainstream media's lack of understanding? If it seems that I am perhaps putting too much emphasis on the game's penchant for controversy, wait till you unlock the code for unlimited ammo and lay into a dense crowd of 75 or so with a mini-gun (remember the one Governor Ventura lifted off the chopper in *Predator*? Like that one). I'm telling you, it's unlike anything you've ever experienced in a video game. When I asked Rockstar's director of development Jamie King if State could suffer the same fate as Thrill Kill, the answer was, "Absolutely not. I personally became concerned that traditional media outlets might try to wave the controversy flag, but it's clear after playing [State of Emergency] for two seconds that this game is hysterical fun and will not provoke anyone to do anything more than remain addicted to the game. But it should be noted that the game is only for mature gamers: it is rated M by the ESRB and is only for those over 17 years old." It's a good time to be 17. **play**

PS2

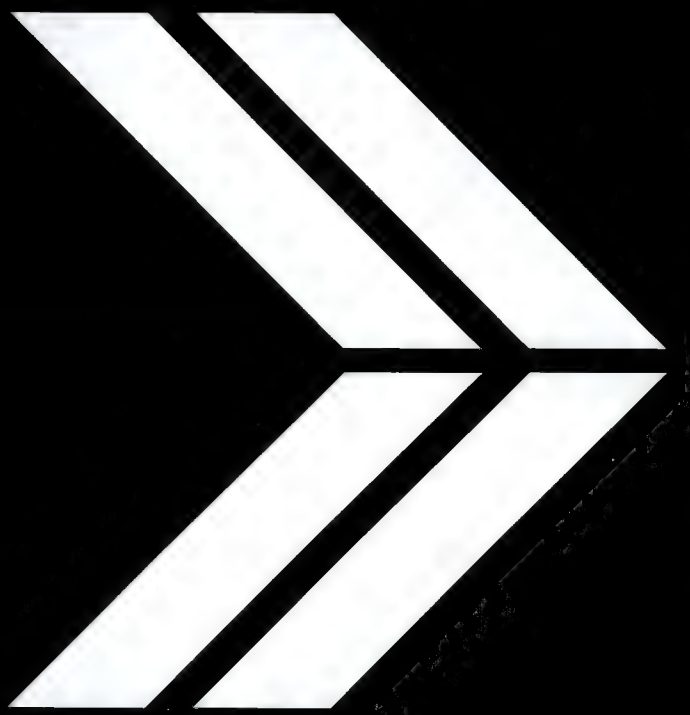
STATE OF EMERGENCY preview

developer: VIS publisher: rockstar available: early feb

Smash TV for grown-ups! State of Emergency is so exaggerated in its presentation that while you're playing, "violence" never really enters into the equation. It's just a nonstop kick in the ass to play.

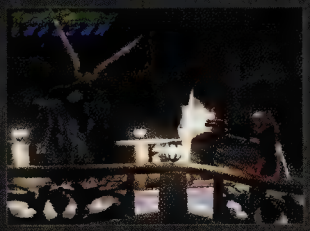
2001
YEAR IN REVIEW

edited by **dave halverson**



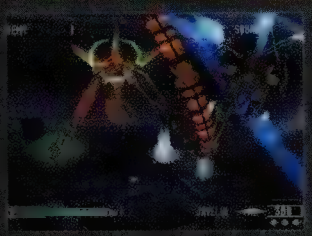
A Sony on fire, two new consoles, one hit movie, and a screaming portable helped make 2001 a legendary year, and a turning point for video games. Emerging technology has all but broken the chains that bound gaming past, making way for renewed ingenuity and mainstream success. A new industry is leaving its cocoon, flying off to tackle Hollywood and merchandising in a world where the single-product mentality has given way to branding, and branding, the budgets to make games like we've never dreamt of before. Here's how we saw the year 2001, one we will never forget for more reasons than just the games we played.

ACTION



1. devil may cry ps2

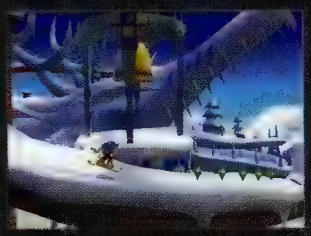
2. onimusha ps2



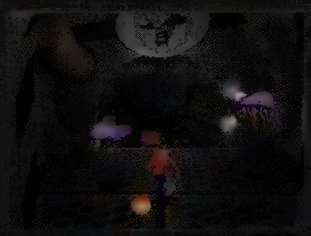
3. zone of the enders ps2

Is it any wonder that Capcom and Konami owned this category in '01? With *Devil May Cry* and *Onimusha*, Capcom broke the graphics barrier with two games that played as good as they looked, while Konami's nimble mech opera redefined intuitive control and graceful animation.

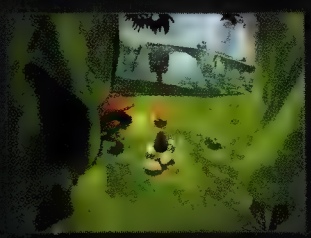
PLATFORMING



1. klonoa 2: lunatea's veil ps2



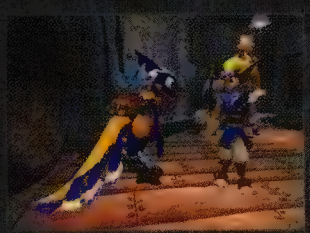
2. crash bandicoot: wrath of cortex ps2



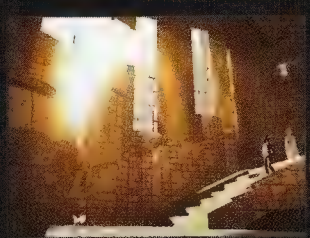
3. rayman revolution ps2

While platformers no longer dominate the way they once did—even with the lack of a single RARE or Nintendo first-party game—the strain produced three memorable games. With *Klonoa 2: Lunatea's Veil* we finally got the follow up to *Door of Phantomile* we'd been begging for; it was an unforgettable experience. *Rayman* shone through again as well, and if you're a fan of classic *Crash* gameplay, you're probably still looking for that 100% on *Wrath of Cortex*.

ACTION-ADVENTURE



1. jak and daxter ps2

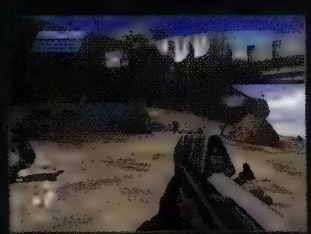


2. ico ps2

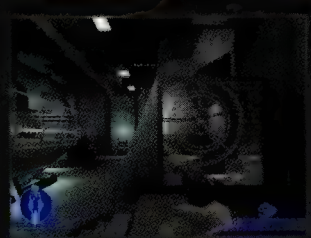
3. metal gear solid 2: sons of liberty ps2

Every winner in this category represents a turning point for gaming as a whole: *Jak and Daxter* for its worldly views and entirely new gameplay schemes, *ICO* for its silent storytelling, enchantment and film-like qualities, and the highly anticipated *Metal Gear Solid: Sons of Liberty* gave us exactly what we wanted—masterful covert ops gameplay with awesome graphics and AI.

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER



1. halo xbox

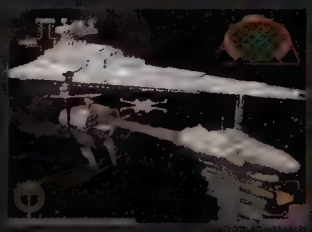


2. 007: agent under fire ps2

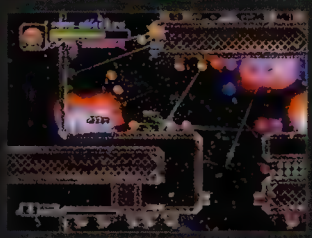
3. half-life ps2

Well, looky here, three first-person shooters with storylines and killer graphics to boot! *Halo* set the bar high for the years ahead with bump mapping, driveable vehicles, and an interactive story that had us ducking underneath our desks, while a totally kick-ass *Bond* swaggered into second. Meanwhile, *Half-Life* got a new life on the PS2. The game took forever to come out, but the end product exhibited a marked improvement over the classic PC game of '98.

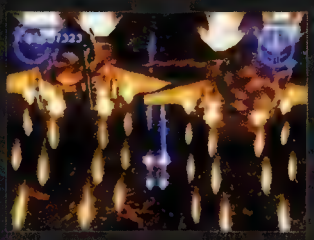
SHOOTING



1. rogue leader gamecube



2. bangai-o dreamcast



3. silpheed ps2

The combination of a John Williams score and raining down on the Evil Empire put the sparkle in Nintendo's otherwise sparse GameCube launch in a year that saw far too few shooters. Luckily, two sleeping imports, *Bangai-O* and *Silpheed*, finally crossed the retail front lines, giving us something to keep our trigger fingers from seizing up. We're going to Deafcon 2 anticipating a new *Darius* or *R-Type*.

RACING

1. gran turismo 3 ps2

2.project gotham racing xbox

3. ricky carmichael mx 2002 ps2

Gran Turismo lived up to some of the loudest hype ever with yet another stunning outing. The deepest racing game on record, it's scary to think a driving game could control or look any better; although, in a close second is *Project Gotham*—a launch Xbox game—nearly does. Rounding out the top three: the quintessential *Motocross* ballet—*RC MX 2002*. Once you find this game's rhythm, it's an out-of-body experience.

ALTERNATIVE DRIVING

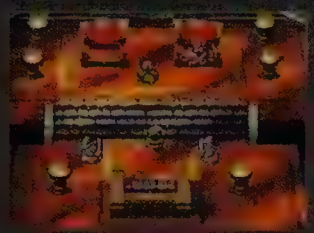
1. twisted metal black ps2

2. smuggler's run ps2

3. spy hunter ps2

Another category to receive a shot (no, make that a cannon blast) in the arm was the vehicular slaughter, which took a bath in *Black*. Massive hubs teaming with strategic demolition–it was a mad man's ball with fast cars and wicked weapons. Speaking of wide-open spaces, Angel Studios sicked the Five-0 on us again, only this time we had intel and a squad of new rides, and Midway shocked us all with a cool-ass follow-up to the legendary coin-op Spy Hunter.

ROLE PLAYING GAME



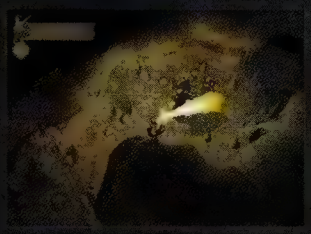
1. dragon warrior VII ps

2. phantasy star online dreamcast

3. final fantasy x ps2

Japan's highest selling game—ever—won us over, proving that graphics alone do not make a great game. *DW VII* is a magical quest that builds to an amazing finale. No matter how entrenched you think you are in the next generation, we suggest going back for one more trip. In second—even without a one player feature—*PSO* exuded vintage Yuji Naka, with the musical score of the year and yet another quiver of legendary character designs. *FFX* had the show with a great new battle system, but with a retarded lead and... sports angle (yuck!) did not have the go.

ACTION-ROLE PLAYING



1. baldur's gate: dark alliance ps2

2. dark cloud ps2

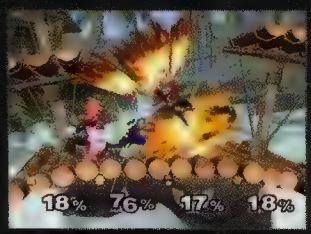
3. paper mario n64

We said hello to Adrianna this year in the single best looking top-down console game ever created. Black Isle even let us into her dressing room—and what a wonderful place it is. *Dark Alliance* is what happens when everything comes together perfectly. Another stroke of genius was exhibited in Sony's *Dark Cloud*, an action-RPG that allowed the player to construct entire regions of the game along the way, as well as rescue and interact with its inhabitants. In third—weighing in at a hefty 64 bits—it'sa *Mario*!

FIGHTING

1. dead or alive 3 ps2

2. guilty gear x ps2



3. super smash bros. melee gamecube

The sophisticated architecture of Tecmo's *DOA3* just edged out the hand-drawn splendor of Sammy's *Guilty Gear X*. With *DOA3*, we witnessed a new milestone in 3D fighting with massive, seamless arenas, a new level of interaction, and a more controlled jiggle. In third, the easy to play, hard to master *Smash Bros. Melee* set the stage for freeze-frame replays and theme-based "levels" within a fighting framework.

ALTERNATIVE

1. grand theft auto 3 ps2

2. pikmin gamecube

3. rez ps2

We had a debate about where exactly to put *GTA III*, but wherever it ended up, is was on top. With elements of action, role-playing, simulation, shooting and driving, it sits atop the alternative category smoking a big fat stogie after pummeling *Metal Gear* at the box office. In second, the adorable, charming *Pikmin* (aka *Miyamoto's Garden*) makes its bid for backyard supremacy. And, in third, Sega's surprising musical shooter *Rez* is a dazzling example of shooting innovation.

SPORTS

1. nfl 2k2 ps2

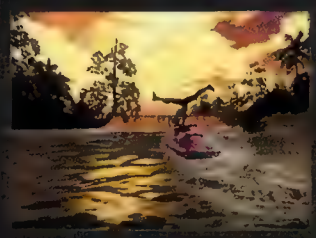
2. fifa 2002 gamecube, ps2

3. tennis 2k2 dreamcast

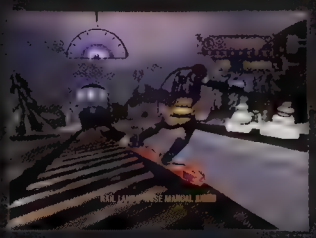
Sega went along this year with Sony and the result was pure pigskin magic. *NFL 2K2* combines the most intuitive control ever with VC's visual powerhouse (although, I hear Detroit still can't win.) In second, the office party fave *Fifa* said, "Phu-king Goooaaal!" And, in third, Sega's follow-up to *Tennis 2K*, featured Venus and the girls—but no Kornikova or Hingis.

EXTREME SPORTS

1. tony hawk 3 gamecube, ps2, xbox



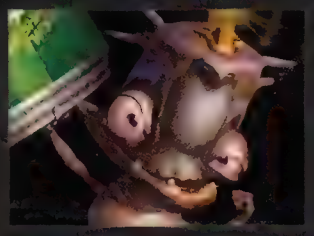
2. splashdown xbox



3. dark summit xbox

Millions spelled "skate" yet again this year grinding and shredding with Tony and the boyz amidst massive urban centers and schoolyards on every console in existence. *T. Hawk* is the king of the franchises. Crave had something to say with Rainbow Studios' wet n wild ATV follow-up, *Splashdown*; and with *Dark Summit*, THQ freshened up the over-saturated snowboard genre by introducing role-playing elements and a hot female lead to a resort under siege.

BEST CHARACTERS



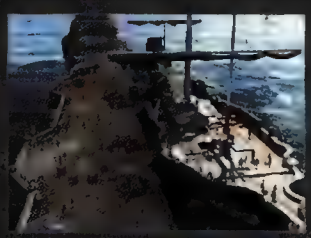
1. munch xbox

2.jak xbox

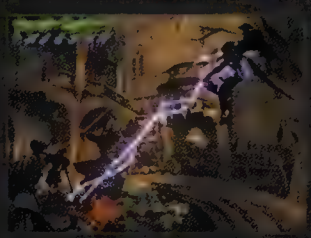
3. captain olimar gamecube

Squeaking into first place—no busty babe here—is a freaky-looking land fish thingy named Munch. The Gobbit with odditude; Mensa's got nothing on Munch and his shocking psychic power. In second, the pinnacle of animation and grace in a 3D character. Jak just edged out the loafing peculiarity of Captain Olimar. (If you see a tiny little space ship flying around in the backyard, give him a little golf clap for us.)

BEST GRAPHICS



1. final fantasy x



2. devil may cry ps2

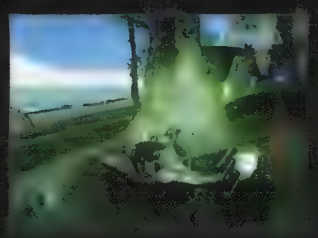
3. baldur's gate: dark alliance ps2

What it lacked in dubbing and story, *FFX* made up for with its stunning visual presentation. From the seamless models to the flawless CG, visions of vintage Square shone through. Very, very close behind, Capcom's *Devil May Cry* rewrote the book on goth design and wicked creatures. In third place, Black Isle's *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* gently introduced console players to a top-down world once relegated solely to the world of PC.

BEST MUSIC/SOUND

1. phantasy star online dreamcast

2. onimusha ps2



3. halo xbox

Phantasy Star Online ran away with this category the second we pressed the power button. It's been a very long time since a video game soundtrack washed over us the way this one does. The music in *PSO* instantly transports you into the game's world by audibly altering your mood. Magic. *Onimusha* and *Halo* both had stunning soundtracks that succeeded by doing the same thing—just not to the same extreme. Gaming remains a breeding ground for breakthrough music. Something to be proud of.

2001 GAME OF THE YEAR

NAUGHTY DOG'S *JAK AND DAXTER*

ps2

Once everyone in the office had a go at Jak and Daxter, the decision was swift in coming. J&D truly is a milestone for gaming, a testament to not only technology but design, and Naughty Dog's dedication to giving gamers every ounce of their beings. Undoubtedly, this is the beginning of a beautiful new franchise, and we're already looking forward to a playable Kiera and wondering how they can possibly top this outstanding achievement.

BEST OF THE BEST

PLAYSTATION 2

jak and daxter

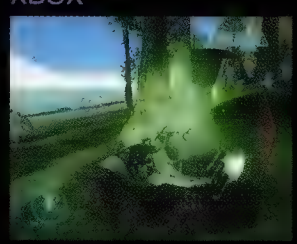
No surprise here. *J&D* obviously takes the prize. Did we mention that the game is epic in scope... and spectacular... and ingenious... and super fun and...

GAMECUBE

pikmin

Pikmin barely edged out *Luigi's Mansion* to claim the prize for the young GameCube. Although you can never go wrong with Miyamoto, we miss Mario and expect to see him here in 12 months.

XBOX



halo

Seldom, if ever, has a first-person adventure immersed us the way *Halo* has. As close to playing a sci-fi movie as you'll likely ever come—with the power of the Xbox at its back—*Halo* is pure magic.

PSONE

dragon warrior VII

Longtime RPG kings, Enix shows no signs of selling out. True to their roots, they took *DW VII* for the PlayStation as far as it could go—and the result is stunning. *Act Raiser 3*, here we come!

GAME BOY ADVANCE

castlevania

There remain few experiences as hallowed as an original 2D *Castlevania*. *Circle of the Moon* eclipsed the competition with traditional gameplay, a haunting soundtrack and legendary bosses.

DREAMCAST

phantasy star online

A beautiful experience. We never imagined embracing an online *Phantasy Star*, but Yuji Naka made us all believers with *PSO*. The inclusion of a one-player quest would surely put *PSO* in the running for next year's RPG prize.

in the year 2000... and one

1. **jak and daxter**
2. halo
3. devil may cry
4. gta III
5. ico
6. baldurs gate dark alliance
7. munch's oddysee
8. dragon warrior vii
9. max payne (xbox)
10. rc mx 2002 (xbox)

DAVE HALVERSON

I've had illegal amounts of fun this year watching my 'rainy day' pile grow into a tower, as new games I have to play just kept pouring in. There never was a dry spell. It seems like I picked up the controller last January and just never put it down. 2001 wasn't all a bed of roses, though. I was little dissapointed with Nintendo's Game Cube launch, marking the first time in ten years I've been underwhelmed by the Big N. Experiencing a new Nintendo console without a Mario or RARE title just didn't feel right. I also expected that the hundreds of thousands of Dreamcast owners (myself included) would get a little more respect in '01. The promise of new titles seemed to buckle under the weight of the new seige of consoles. But in a year that saw the return of 2D—thanks to the godsent Game Boy Advance—Microsoft's bid in the console wars, and the first game company to create games specifically for the over 18 crowd, these are a pin prick. I have to give special props to Rockstar for having the fortitude to bring us *GTA III*, *Max Payne* and, soon, *State of Emergency*. Games like these will assure that videogames continue to grow as a culture, and that the budgets will be there to support new concepts as major talents currently outside the industry start to catch us on their radar.

I'd also like to pay homage to the runners up that just missed my list: *Furfighters VR* and *Soul Reaver 2*. It was a difficult year to pick ten games—that's for sure. Thank god *Maximo* is coming in 2002 or I'd have had a real problem. Choosing between *Jak and Daxter* and *Maximo* would be like choosing between Denise Richards and Halle Berry... except if faced with that option, any mortal man would probably explode.

1. **grand theft auto 3**
2. jak and daxter
3. onimusha
4. pikmin
5. phantasy star online
6. max payne (xbox)
7. ico
8. fur fighters: viggo's revenge
9. super smash bros. melee
10. devil may cry

JON M GIBSON

Freedom has been the defintive strapline for gaming this year—just analyze the facts. *Grand Theft Auto 3* is the epitome of the phrase "go anywhere, do anything." Steal a taxi cab, mow down a police brigade with a souped-up Hummer—blood spilling, gas tanks exploding—hurl Molotov cocktails into Central Park, play "chase the Triad fish truck," or simply cruise about town, looking for hidden ramps to propel you over the cityscape. *GTA3* is a game you can play with goals in mind, adhering to Mafioso guidelines; or ignore the objectives all together. *Jak and Daxter*, in animated glory, employees similarly massive environments. That's the fun of freedom: you can listen to townsfolk, obeying the rules, or you can explore—and at this next-gen stage of gaming, I do mean explore.

On that note, *Pikmin* is also key in my thesis. It's probably best described as a garden simulator, but what Miyamoto has crafted is another freedom-drenched safari—it just takes place in your backyard, amid sunflowers and violent arachnids. *Phantasy Star* finds a home with freedom, too, based in an online universe that is completely random; every time you power up and log on, thousands of different players await you as journeymen in your role-playing quest.

But the freedom will only expand—it will only mature through time. So when the time comes when a *real* eXistenZ arrives at local game hubs, will you jack the latest in gaming tech into your spinal cord. I will.

biased opinion

1. **ico**
2. jak and daxter
3. pikmin
4. metal gear solid 2
5. halo
6. devil may cry
7. gran turismo 3
8. rogue leader
9. onimusha
10. dragon warrior VII

TIMOTHY PIKE

2001 will certainly go down as one the greatest years of gaming in history. The fact that I had such a difficult time narrowing my list of the ten best games is all the proof that I need. It was a delectable chore indeed. And in reality, every game in my top five could have easily been in the number one spot, so good was this year's crop. In the end, however, I had to give the nod to *ICO* for purely emotional reasons. Certainly, *Jak and Daxter* is more ambitious and lengthier, *Halo* more visceral, *Metal Gear Solid 2* more meticulously crafted, and *Pikmin* more original, but *ICO* enthralled me in a way that no game ever has. Playing it was like being in a dream state.

As for the rest of my list, it's pretty predictable, I suppose, save for the inclusion of *Dragon Warrior VII*. Sure, it was a little late in coming and the graphics and interface look ancient, but the game is a classic RPG of the old school with a wonderful story, and is a far more satisfying experience than, say, *Final Fantasy X* (Did I just say that?).

1. **ico**
2. jak and daxter
3. devil may cry
4. halo
5. onimusha
6. metal gear solid 2
7. silent hill 2
8. rogue leader
9. twisted metal black
10. soul reaver 2

BRADY FIECHTER

They're a mystery to me: those whiny gamers who cling hopelessly to the past, mired in nostalgia, pining that games aren't as good as they used to be, that creativity and inspired craftsmanship have been sucked dead by the push to reach the masses. Stew all you want and let the rest of us reflect on a year that inspired perhaps more superb games than any year before. Forget about all the swill that flows around the gems; as this industry continues to burgeon, as the money begins to pile up, more and more crap will follow, but so will the greats. Ports are regretfully common, a slam dunk is invariably followed by countless clones, and risks are becoming taboo in the business plans, but a bigger industry translates to many more designers nailing the mark. This has been a year of rebirth in many ways, with technology growing a world in which gamemakers can let their imaginations bloom with remarkably less constraint. Visual communication of emotion and story telling, the way a virtual world is given life, mood and presence, is now as much a part of the game experience as the movement and purpose of the action onscreen. And this is a good thing. A good game will always be one that plays addictively well, and now, the truly great games will be those that sweep us away into their compelling space and time. More than anything, 2001 will be remembered by me as the moment when technology has finally revealed video games as artistic accomplishments.

BARBARIANS AT THE GATE

Titus prepares to launch a fighting franchise with *Barbarians*–a fresh concept a with a medieval mind set.

On the surface, Titus' Barbarian for the PS2 looks like a juiced arena fighter in the vein of Destrega—which it is. But this arena fighter begins where the rest leave off. Another original title looking to further its strain, Barbarian looks to meld fighting and role playing into an evolving quest layered within an interactive plot. You can play the game in the conventional manner (with up to four players versus four common CPU enemies) within a number of battle modes, or go on a quest fighting your way across Barbaria, a region besieged by darkness at the hands of Zaugg (cue the massive medieval gong). As you claim victory in each massive hub, where you choose to go next actually determines how your warrior grows as you earn upgrades, and leads to one possible fate. You can then use your battle-scarred baddy against friends in multiplayer, or on further quests with the ultimate goal of killing Zaugg.

Each of the 10 characters has his or her own branching story, allowing you to alter your destiny based on decisions you make within the game. For instance, as barrels rain down on you, catching and stacking them might elevate you to a higher plane and a new enemy—thus a new branch. Conquests hold mysteries as well, like secret areas, special attacks and extra costumes. Even the mini-games serve the plot, as they reveal unknown techniques and skills. Sounds intriguing; looks gorgeous. Give me four wicked, scantily clad wenches to fondle and I'll keep the controller warm all night.

DAVE HALVERSON

BARBARIANS — preview

developer: sapphire | publisher: titus | available: q1

An extremely promising new arena fighter with blazing graphics and lots of new ideas. Let's hope it plays as well as it looks and sounds.

I HERD
THAT

Herdy Gerdy is the first game that can truly be billed as a living cartoon. It's like an interactive Disney flick with better art

Before Lara Croft swaggered onto the scene, Core Design was known mainly for their quirky, distinctively exaggerated characters. Chuck Rock, Son of Chuck, Bubba 'n' Stix, and my favorite, Wonderdog, were but a few of their many memorable 16-bit aspirations. They made platformers—groundbreaking, aesthetically gorgeous 2D romps. They achieved scaling and rotation on 16-bit (quite a feat) and always injected oodles of comic flair into there creations. It was, in fact, that comic verve that led them to create a female lead with such an amazing rack.

Back then, Core always had a smallish stand at CES (the real Vegas trade show that was pre-empted by E3) where we'd sit with the big cheese Jeremy Smith and make fun of just about everything in sight. Then Lara appeared on the scene and (understandably) the whole company seemed to change focus.

Fast forward to 2001 and, with all that success behind them, that old Core magic seems to be peeking through once again—by way of a shepherd named Gerdy. Core has been talking about Herdy Gerdy since the days of the Sega Saturn, but it wasn't until 2000 that we learned exactly what they had up their cloak. Gerdy herds; (Herdy…Gerdy) we should have figured that one out a long time ago. The question is, how do you make a game about herding creatures compelling? This is where you need to toss out convention and tap into the minds that brought us a pot-bellied boulder-tossing caveman and a walkin' dog with a turd coil on his head. It takes a long time to make magic happen, but when it finally does, it always seems worth the wait.

Herdy Gerdy is the first game that can truly be billed as a living cartoon. It's like an interactive Disney flick with better art. The characters, an unforgettable cast worthy of mass exposure, epitomize the amalgamation of traditional animation and polygons. They really look and move like two-dimensional cartoon characters. The result is a sense of being a part of the story that is uncanny. As Gerdy crosses the massive countryside, conversing with a diversity of cuddly (and not so cuddly) villagers and beasts, his surroundings check in at nothing short of stunning. Leafs blow across your path, snow weighs lightly on the slightly higher elevations—the season is in full bloom.

Gerdy's immediate objective is to awaken his snoozing father, the region's expert herder and a shoe-in at the forthcoming Master Herders Tourney. He soon learns that Dad's nemesis has put him under a sleep spell so that he can take the prize and do bad things with the power it brings. Gerdy's only hope is to hone his skills and become the Master himself. Otherwise, the region will fall into certain peril.

So, it's a herding we go. But herding? Can it be any fun? Core manages to make it downright addicting. The concept is simple: Gerdy plants a Herding Stick in the ground to attract herds of Doops (tiny, pink, chick-like creatures) and other assorted beasts as the game progresses, and then leads them to their pens or corrals. No sooner than you master this technique, other beasts show up to impede your progress. They like Doops for lunch, and if Gerdy gets near them, they slap him silly. Luring them into traps and leading herds around them is the game's first real challenge. From there, with each passing episode, the creatures become increasingly smarter and react decisively to Gerdy's technique. The herding, woven into the game's role-playing and adventure elements, makes the gameplay overall quite unlike anything you've ever played before. It can only be described as magical—if you're the imaginative type, at least.

There are, however, a couple of hurdles that the Herdy Gerdy team has yet to overcome, the most important being the frame rate. Currently the game almost constantly chugs somewhat as it tries to deal with massive, densely populated environments. Locking them down at 30-fps would be suitable; 60-fps would be a miracle. We know the PS2 can do it, it's just a matter of implementation. The other necessities (camera, final AI, cut scenes, etc.) are all being addressed.

One thing is certain: as concepts involving massive 3D worlds begin to gain a foothold in this evolving industry, Herdy Gerdy answers the call as a game that not only exudes vastness but one that imparts originality as well.

DAVE HALVERSON

Herdy Gerdy Q&A with Adrian Smith

Herdy Gerdy has been sneaking around since the Sega Saturn days. Whom did you let make the decision it was go time on PS2?
AS: There were a number of reasons. Technical reasons were one factor and also the fact that around this time we were also shown and started to have discussions with Sony about PS2. We always though that the vision that we had for this game was going to be very difficult to produce but like most developers we were very reluctant to make any compromise to the gameplay to bring it to market. However, with the discussion about PS2 and some of its strengths, we saw a real opportunity to produce the game that was locked in our heads.

Gerdy seems like a throwback to the Core of old with its rich, exaggerated characters designs and fantastical locales. Is this the beginning of an old-school Core resurgence? Might we see the caveman sent day rise? C'mon, you know you want to Chuck Rock 3D—think of it!
AS: Ahhhh the good old days, but I wouldn't say that it's a resurgence, things haven't changed at Core, we have obviously been busy with Lara for a few years, but at the same time we have been flat-out developing games like Herdy Gerdy, and more to come. Our focus is still on bringing something native and different to the market and I think that this is still very much our dream. Chuck Rock 3D. Ahhhh, now that could be something to think about?

I'm shocked at the presentation of this game. If ever one could be categorized as resigned, this is it. I'm especially thrilled to know you've somehow achieved making 3D characters appear as traditionally animated characters. This is easily some of the best character animation I've ever seen from a 3D Disney film. How sophisticated are these models under their skin?
AS: Well that's very nice of you to say so.

The elements that you mention—look and feel etc.—of the game was very much a big part of the overall design. The initial concept was very much to produce this very different look, feel and experience. We wanted to combine a traditional hand painted background which is very rich and vibrant with a traditional cell type look and feel to the game characters.
AS: This obviously brought many different technical and graphical challenges. We found that we need particular skills on the art side and this meant that we had to go and get people from traditional 2D background like Warner Bros., Cosgrove Hall, etc., that hadn't got much (if any) experience in 3D, but had the style that we were looking for.

The trick of course is in making a game that relies on story and fumbling appeal to the masses. What are the make-or-break elements of the gameplay itself that you feel will keep us glued?
AS: I would have to say "Variety," as the saying goes, "is the spice of life."

Herdy Gerdy is a game unlike anything that's currently available. It's about a real living world that you play in. A world where everything that you do has an effect on everything else, a world where no two things ever happen the same.
AS: I think that Herdy Gerdy brings together great elements of different genres into one experience. Herdy Gerdy ... this as a whole is what we are very proud of. The fact that you feel for Gerdy during his adventure you feel his pain and enjoyment. I think that the games offer more variety, interaction and longevity than any other game out there today.

After the massive success of Tomb Raider, are you more open and free to explore original ideas like Herdy Gerdy? Lara was, after all, quite risky at the time.
AS: Certainly having Lara has made a difference in some ways, but we still get up in the morning and go to work with the belief that this is a great industry to be working in and all that we want to do is to produce the best game possible. I think that with the launch of new consoles like PS2, etc., it's very important for the development community to give the consumers something new and different that shows what the machine is possible of doing, and not just settling for a sequel.

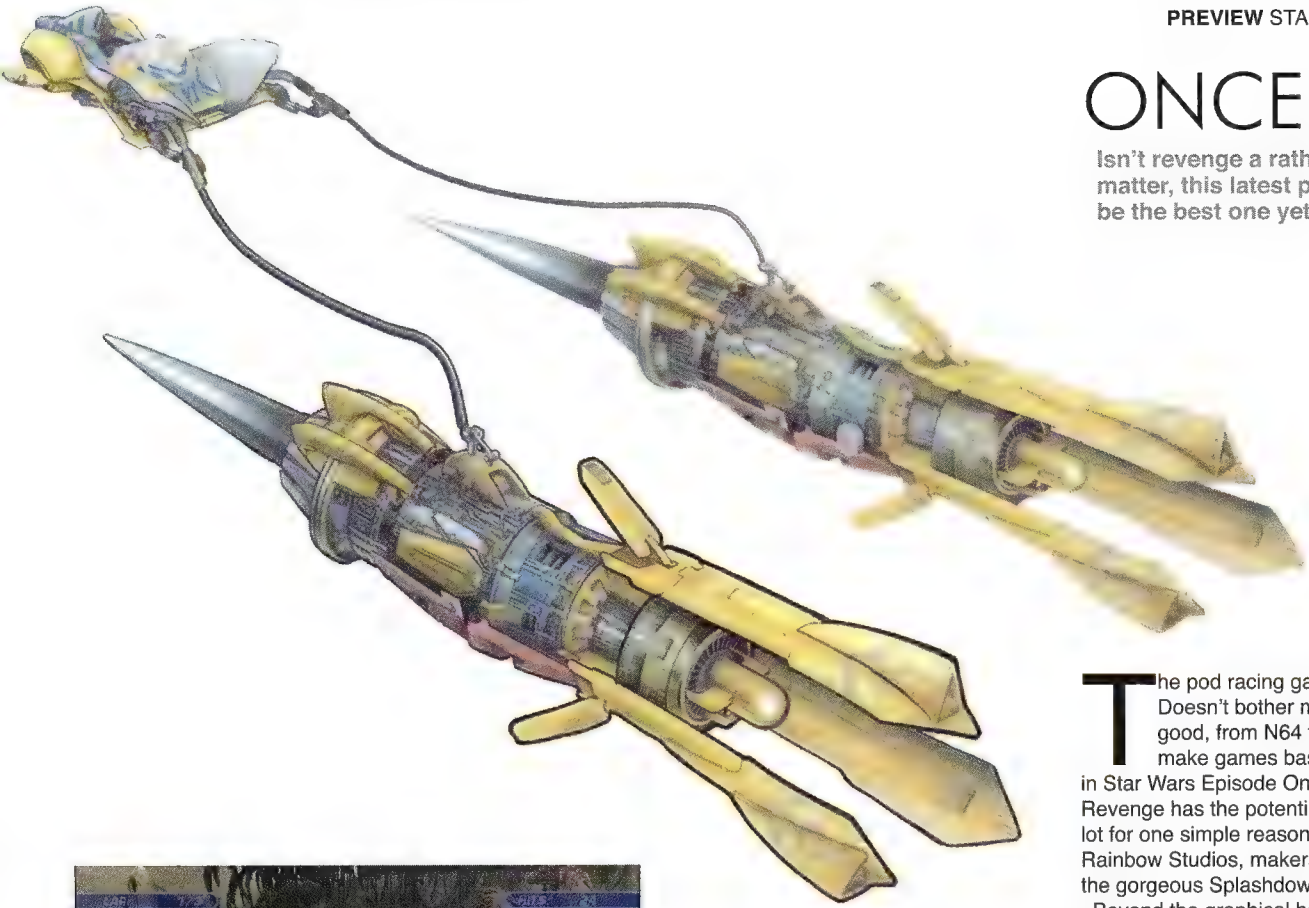
The face of gaming is definitely changing thanks to games like this. Concepts once thought impossible are popping up everywhere. Do you have Herdy Gerdy in mind as a franchise, or are you testing the waters?
AS: I think that with all the time and love and effort that we have put into Herdy Gerdy, we all believe that this could be the start of a great relationship; however, a lot of this has to do with how the consumers take to the game. We are as happy as we could be with the game currently and believe that it really is representative of what we started out to produce on paper some time ago. **play**

PS2 **HERDY GERDY** preview

developer: core publisher: eidos available:februa

ONCE MORE?

Isn't revenge a rather anti-Jedi notion? No matter, this latest pod racing effort should be the best one yet.



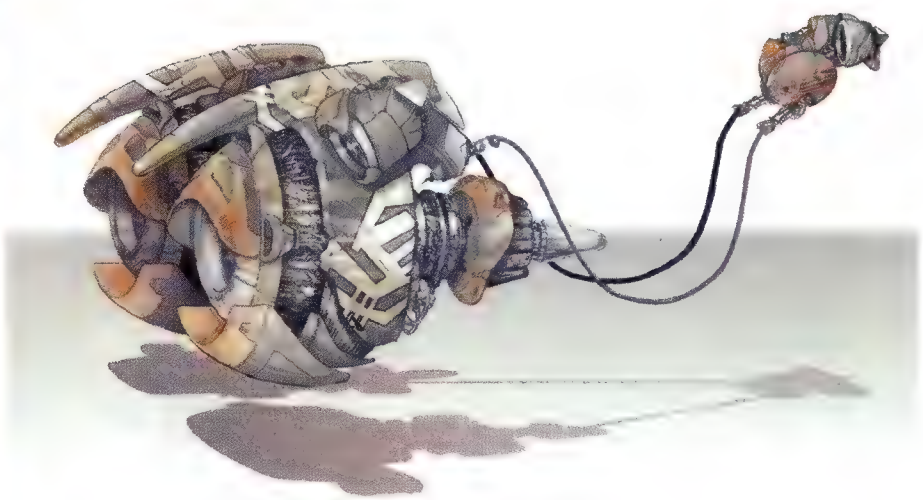
The pod racing games just don't stop coming. Doesn't bother me. They've all been pretty good, from N64 to arcade, and why not make games based on the best single scene in Star Wars Episode One? But Star Wars Racer Revenge has the potential to be the best of the lot for one simple reason: it is being developed by Rainbow Studios, makers of ATV Offroad Fury and the gorgeous Splashdown.

Beyond the graphical hopes for Star Wars Racer Revenge (bit of a mouthful, no?) is that it promises fantastic physics. Both ATV and Splashdown were great physical experiences, and the conceit of Racer being that you control each of the two engine pods with an analog stick should make the game absolutely sublime from a dynamic standpoint.

Star Wars Racer Revenge is due this March from LucasArts.

PETER GARDEN

Already we can see the same sort of graphic sophistication that is found in Splashdown and ATV



PS2

STAR WARS RACER REVENGE — preview

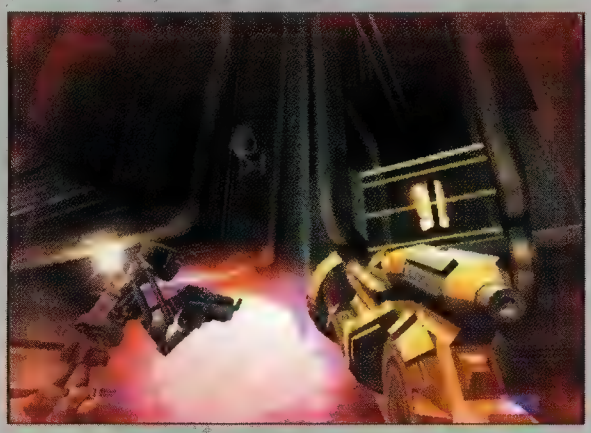
developer:rainbow studios publisher:lucasarts available:march

Rainbow Studios is bringing its advanced graphic skills and physics modelling to the Star Wars universe with the latest game based on the film's stunning pod racing scene

HALLOWED HALLS

Free Radical's second kick at the can shows off the magic they found with GoldenEye

BRADY FIECHTER



PS2

TIMESPLITTERS 2 — preview

developer: free radical publisher: eidos available: spring

If one level is enough to go by, here is an awesome FPS game, showcasing superb visuals and kinetic gameplay, freaky cool character designs and engaging levels. Can't wait for this one.

SEGA'S SMILE

With Jet Set Future and GunValkyrie, Sega may end up being the best reason to buy an Xbox. We spoke with Takayuki Kawago at Smilebit about what makes GunValkyrie tick...

What are your impressions of the Xbox hardware?

TK: For the U.S. release, I think it was satisfactory in regards to volume. But when I mention the competition, it could have been more overwhelming since the U.S. is Microsoft's home territory. Regarding the hardware, I have no complaints but I think the U.S Xbox controller would have been fine if it was the Japanese version.

GUNVALKYRIE originally started development on Dreamcast for use with the light gun and controller. How has the shift to Xbox affected the design of the game? Were you forced to basically start from scratch?

TK: The switch from the gun controller had no bad influences on the game. It is due in part to the Xbox controller having two analog sticks. Regarding the influences that came from the switch to the Xbox system, as the specs for the hardware advanced in leaps and bounds, personnel expenses to create the game had also been increased drastically.

What were your main goals in designing GUNVALKYRIE?

TK: Because there are few games of this type nowadays, I wanted to create a game with a refreshing feeling where you can control characters at your will and shoot the creatures freely.

What are you most proud of in the game?

TK: The characters, the world view and the refreshing feelings.

Were you inspired by any property in particular during the design stages?

TK: Some of my influences in designing the game were the movie *Starship Troopers* and Steam Punk.

Are you pleased to be working for a Sega which no longer confines itself to one piece of hardware?

TK: There is no problem at all, but I feel somewhat incongruous.

What do you think of the potential of the Xbox in Japan? Do you see it succeeding, or do you concede that your Xbox development is more or less targeted at a U.S. market?

TK: I do not think that Xbox can immediately gain a share large enough to turn tables in the market, but there is a possibility that it will acquire a big part. In order to achieve it, it is important not to make a half-willed approach to the fashions in the game industry thus far. I also think that they require a sense of flexibility in determining the lineup and promotions in stores. Of course, we take the U.S. market into consideration, but this fact does not change the basis of a game. **play**

THE OMEN

The once-ominipotent vampire Kain is banished from his thrown, left to plot his malevolent rise to power yet again. Welcome to the second bloodletting.

So you're faced with two choices: (a) toss the entire world into eternal damnation; or (b) give your life in exchange for the salvation of the rest of the living. If you're a vampire, evil, fairly perturbed and not very nice, your name is Kain, and you choose (a).

Which brings us to the present, 400 years after the world was left to rot in the suffocating darkness of Kain's treachery. Kain thought he'd rule forever, but some mysterious force in the land of Nosgoth took everything from him, leaving him even more perturbed. As a resilient vampire who enjoyed ruling the world and commanding legions of vampires far too much, Kain is ready to kill, suck blood, decapitate, curse, implode and dismember anyone in Nosgoth who chooses to get in his way of finding revenge and newfound power.

All this darkness, violence, gloom and doom collects to form a very promising sequel, Blood Omen 2. Much has changed since the original Blood Omen, leaving an entirely new experience to take its place. Stealth is a big part of your mission, and the fully 3D world completely changes the complexion of Kain's tasks.

Be patient fellow Kain fans; Blood Omen 2 is very close to its release, and it's looking great. **play**

PS2

BLOOD OMEN 2

preview

developer: nintendo publisher: nintendo available: now

Raziel breathes darkness, but the original vampire king is back in this excellingly ambitious sequel to the original Blood Omen: Legacy of Kain.

FINAL FANTASY XI

ONLINE

ファイナルファンタジーXI

The great Final Fantasy experiment. After ten games, four systems, and countless battles, Square's epic series will be going online later this year. Though Sony has yet to finalize the details of the PS2's network, such as when it's going online in North America, we can at least enjoy this little sneak peak at what Square has in store for us once the network is up and running.

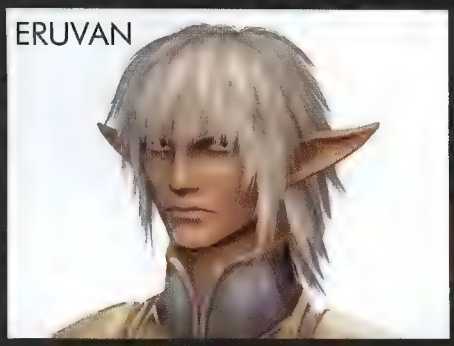
Final Fantasy XI is understandably a huge departure for the series, as we find something closer to Phantasy Star Online than any previous FF. But FFXI is far more ambitious than PSO. For instance, whereas PSO allowed only four members to play as a team, FFXI will allow six players per team. Using the so-called Alliance system, three teams of six can band together for particularly difficult battles for a total of 18 members.

Perhaps the biggest question mark surrounding FFXI in the eyes of many is whether the game will have a substantial and rewarding one-player game; Phantasy Star Online certainly did not, and it seems likely that FFXI will be no different. Its reason for being is online play. Those uninterested in this will have no recourse but to wait until FFXII.

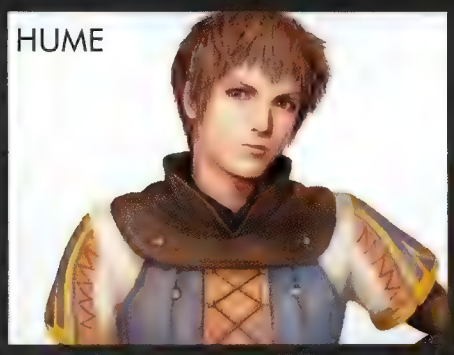
TIMOTHY PIKE

character designs copyright 2001 Testuya Nomura

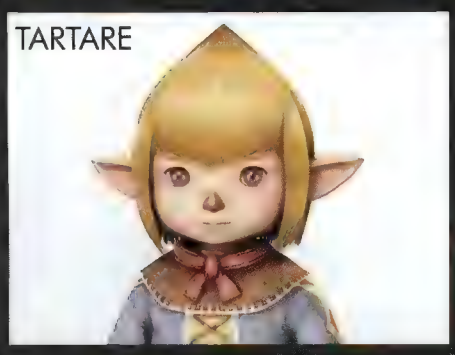
FINAL FANTASY XI CHARACTER TYPES



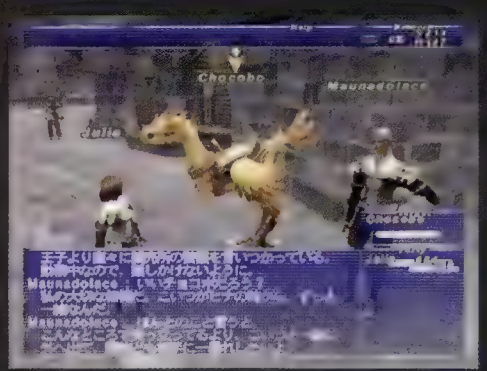
This race is from the arid deserts of Sand King Lear Country. Eruvan are master sword handlers, identified by their tallness and sharp, pointy ears.

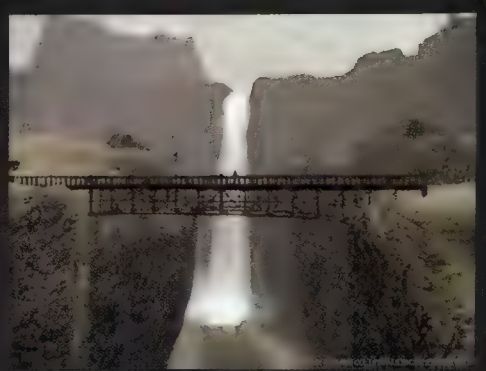


Hailing from the Basutuk Republic, Hume type characters are a great starting point for your adventures in FFXI. These are the standard, balanced characters, easy to deal with as you learn your way around this brave new world.



This little race of magicians are from Windas Federation, a town devoted to the understanding of magic. Though this race may look childlike (and a little like Michael Jackson in The Wiz), Tartares of all ages and experience have the same innocent look.





If the idea of an online Final Fantasy does not excite you, surely the pure fantasy aesthetic of FFXI will. After the quasi techno/Okinawan motif of FFX, this is indeed refreshing.

PS2

FINAL FANTASY XI — preview

developer square publisher square available march (japan)

Some may call it sacrilege, but Square deserves the benefit of the doubt here. Don't forget how well Phantasy Star Online turned out, and this should be even better.

BLADE 2

After a sloppy beginning on the PS one, the Blade legacy steps onto a pair of next-gen consoles that will surely help the series regain momentum. The obvious: Players control the vendetta-driven half-human/half-vampire bent on ridding the earth of bloodsuckers. Most barely even know the fanged ones exist, but Blade 2 pits you in an underworld where humans are the minority. The game is dark, edgy and benefits greatly from the zest of the PS2 and Xbox (which will hopefully heal the awful load times and drowned murky look of the first). The unknown: Quality of gameplay, which, in an auctioneer like Blade, is all too important. 360 degrees of fighting and a katana-wielding hero is a great combination, so here's hoping UK-based Mucky Foot has some nifty innovations up their sleeve.

JON M GIBSON

developer: activision
publisher: activision
available: march

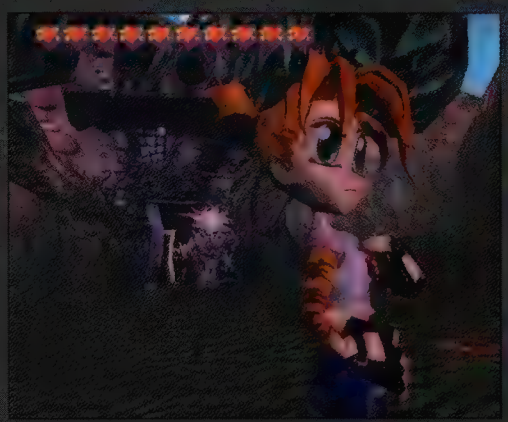
TERMINATOR

With a growing pocket of hype surrounding the franchise, Infogrames, provocateurs of the playable Loony Tunes universe, command the potentially huge Terminator license. Yet, instead of wandering in the shadow of James Cameron's cineplex installments, the publisher tapped Paradigm (Spyhunter) to formulate a story with more bounce, more originality. In third-person—with an in-game camera that is "unique," the developer's promise—players will control the likes of three very diverse characters: Kyle Reese, leading up to his timeskip into the past to protect Sarah Conner; Catherine Luna, a special ops officer with a knack for warfare; and a final, surprise co-star that is yet to be revealed. It's also important to mention that Dawn of Fate is a prequel to Hollywood's Terminator products, offering a fresh approach to an idea that could have easily been a carbon copy.

JON M GIBSON

developer: paradigm
publisher: infogrames
available: spring

MALICE



Argonaut, one of the industry's most talented and underrated developers, have an interesting way of creating games. Their titles are seldom surrounded by mass hype, and they rarely toot their own horn, even though they are responsible for such games as the legendary Starfox, Croc, the underrated Buck Bumble for N64, and Red Dog, one of the best games available for the Dreamcast. In Malice, their latest creation, coming to the X Box and PS2 this Winter, they take one of the most endearing play mechanics of all time, the hammer, and put it in the hands of a little manga-inspired girl named Kat.
A platform adventure laden with puzzles, arcade action, and a quirky original cast, Malice spans 22 free-roaming 3D worlds, and features such crushing weaponry as the Mace of Clubs, the Clockwork Hammer, and...the Quantam Tuning Fork? The game looks to combine all of Argonaut's vast resources, incorporating outstanding visuals, inventive gameplay, twisted storylines, and, for the first time (sorry Croc), a truly kick-ass lead character.

DAVE HALVERSON

"Argonaut has a nice little surprise coming for the Xbox with a big f%$#&* hammer!"

developer: argonaut
publisher: interplay
available: fall

HUNTER: THE RECKONING

Although the world of White Wolf is generally unknown—it's an underground D&D-style pen and paper role-player—it has a particularly cool atmosphere. Dressed with goth punk settings and techno-shrewd characters, Hunter oozes potential on Xbox. With a single goal in check, players indulge in arcade-friendly gameplay—a la Zombie Revenge—and slaughter the undead. But unlike that ever-so-fun Dreamcast romp, there aren't as many limitations (like forced direction instead of freedom to wander) and absolutely no stopwatch ticking (a relief). Loads of handheld artillery allow you to pepper zombies with ease—everything from semi-auto machine guns to samurai blades to medieval axes make mass bloodshed a theme. Each of the four lead characters has varied skills, too; some excel with hand guns while others with sharp edges.

JON M GIBSON

XBOX
developer: mucky foot
publisher: interplay
available: spring

CIRCUS MAXIMUS

Circus Maximus has one great advantage: Exclusivity is on its team. Not only is the game a dedicated Xbox release, it's also the only chariot racing game to hit the market—period. The frozen tundra of Germania, the vastness and spectacle of Rome's Coliseum—that's the idea behind Encore's inaugural console title, seating players in horse-drawn combat tanks ripped directly from grandpa's European history book. And judging from our initial playtest, Kodiak has captured the essence of the chariot race, encompassing both the grandeur of the sport and dynamic weight physics (you must control both driver and warrior, shifting and leaning during turns—otherwise your cart will topple). A multiplayer mode offers a change of pace for the genre, too, wherein friends divide the tasks of the one-player game.

JON M GIBSON

XBOX
developer: kodiak
publisher: encore
available: march

SALT LAKE 2002

The Winter Olympics are here, and for once, the game is going to come out while there's still fresh powder on the slopes. Eidos' Salt Lake 2002 (the officially licensed game of the, er, games) looks fab, and features six events: Men's Alpine downhill skiing, Women's alpine slalom, the always entertaining two-man bob sled, women's freestyle aerials, men's ski jumping K120 individual, and the men's snowboard parallel giant slalom. I still can't believe that snowboarding is an Olympic Sport. So cool. Onto the modes! There are four, including–Free-form; a training feature that allows you to toggle conditions and get a feel for each event–Olympic Mode, which I obviously don't need to explain–Classic mode; a single-player rise through the ranks–and Tournament mode, a single or multi-player night time elimination round where sixteen athletes progress through four rounds of competition. There it is and I didn't say "go for the gold" once! Ah shit!

DAVE HALVERSON

PS2
developer: atd
publisher: eidos
available: jan

EVE OF EXTINCTION

Gene therapy, cloning, bioengineered food, genome-based drugs—scary stuff, especially in the hands of corporations intent on using their technologies for military purposes. Yes kids, evil does exist, and in the world of Eve of Extinction, it's known as Wisdom Incorporated, an organization that has developed a weapon crafted out of inorganic and organic matter—namely, the human soul. As Josh Calloway, you've had enough of Wisdom's experimenting, so you decide to escape the premise with your coworker girlfriend, piss a lot of people off, fight, slash with weapons, shoot, and consistently kill and destroy. And solve puzzles, too — all this in a space where you can utilize everything in sight.

DAVE HALVERSON

PS2
developer: yukes
publisher: eidos
available: fall

DRAGONHEART

Join forces with the beautiful Rynn in one of the deepest and most compelling adventures to ever grace a console

> " If I could cast anybody as Rynn, it would have to be Elizabeth Hurley. She is obviously quite beautiful and has the same sort of attitude as Rynn. "

In the ever-evolving landscape of 3D video games, we are currently witnessing a console revolution. Concepts that once lived only on powerful PCs or in the minds of those who seek to create them are suddenly popping up everywhere—and they're looking as good as they sound on paper. The [illegible] rides atop a mighty dragon and hops off to journey deep into cavernous regions, could never have been realized just a short time ago.

[illegible] looking up, you see a beautiful sky and the planet's two moons. Looking left and right, majestic mountain ranges are in full view, ogre's shift about, placed strategically to get accustomed to Rynn's fighting style, and lens flares shoot through the peaks. These initial moments set the stage for the finest 3D medieval action-adventure game to grace any console. Drakan has it all: great characters, first-rate creature designs, a good story, an epic symphonic soundtrack, and the gameplay to back it all up.

Wretched shape-shifting demons (the worst kind) have consumed the region. [illegible] But only an Elder Dragon, and one of the few remaining Dragon Riders, can [illegible] dragon.

The gameplay in Drakan rocks as much as the pixie, which is more than a bag of pretzels. It seems everyone she comes across wants her to complete a task-a related side story that exists around the core story. Should you complete them, they help weave the player further into the plight of the people, among other things. They also render much needed coin, which Rynn needs to keep up with Blacksmith's growing inventory. Weapons take damage, so until you can get a blade repaired, a backup (as well as a good bow) is always needed. Rynn can slip into different armor, too, as her skill level rises. Dressing her is half the fun. Well, maybe not half.

The main stages consist of Rynn, who is armed to the teeth, making her way through a series of swamps, tunnels, ruins and massive caves to retrieve

objects and information needed to complete each given quest. With inventory management assigned to a shoulder button carousel, healing and changing weapons is seamless. More time to deal with the game's menacing enemies using the now tried-and-true lock-on method. Small to massive reptilian creatures, freakish trolls and the like-they aren't the brightest (especially in one-on-one combat), but as the game progresses they get increasingly more cunning. If you fail to pick certain ones off from afar with your bow, they'll often swarm, so you have to constantly adjust Rynn's battle techniques depending on your environment and its inhabitants. She can also use magic quite extensively. In between flying from place to place, Arok utilizes a lock-on, like Rynn, and uses magic to battle enemy dragons, take out catapults, and clear Rynn's path of any beasts. It's like playing a great shooter everywhere you go.

The two modes, combined with the authentic nature of the villages, castles and camps where the story unfolds, make for one very compelling game. Clever bosses, first-rate voice acting, and stunning visuals bring it all home. The game is put together with great care: stones appear stacked rather than the usual flat textures, giving indoor locales an authentic medieval feel, and the small details like chalices, torches, and lit candles are all modeled in 3D.

This is a game concept fully explored and implemented, the result of years of dedicated service by Surreal Software. The gaming world needed a new heroine. I believe she has arrived.

DAVE HALVERSON

...Deeper still. To find out more about this epic adventure, we spoke with Surreal Software's Scott Cummings on all things Drakan...

Seeing as how the scope of this game seems almost endless (side quests!), I'll ask the obvious questions: How big is the team and how long have you been working on the game?
AP: For the first year or so of production the team consisted of approximately 18 people. For the last nine months, we staffed up to around 36.

Was the game designed from the ground up for PS2?
AP: Long, long ago (more than two years ago) we were thinking about doing a PC sequel to Drakan: Order of the Flame, being published by Psygnosis. Sony absorbed Psygnosis around the same time the PlayStation 2 became a viable development platform. So at that time, we shifted focus and started developing our tools and technologies for PS2.

I've noticed the architecture, especially castle walls, are assembled brick by brick, rather than using flat textures (bravo!). How difficult is this to achieve while maintaining your smooth frame rate?
AP: I am glad you noticed this. It was a very difficult to implement. We wanted to achieve a level of detail rarely seen in games, while still maintaining a consistent frame rate. When figuring out how to construct our architecture, we focused on the strengths of the PS2. This included rendering a ton of small polygons efficiently so we could support the poly count. The real challenge was integrating these highly detailed models into a fairly large environment. This became a balancing act between frame rate, poly count, AI count and various other factors. I think all of these efforts were worth it as the environments have an impressive level of visual depth.

What games, if any, inspired the design?
AP: A ton of games have inspired the creation of Drakan: The Ancients' Gates. Magic Carpet from Bullfrog gave Stu, our technical director, the inspiration to create our terrain engine. Every game I have played has had an impact on the design of Drakan: The Ancients' Gates. A few of the games that have had a particular impact are: Magic Carpet, Panzer Dragoon, Ultima Series (particularly Ultima Underworld), and Tomb Raider.

Tell us about creating Rynn (the next Lara? I think so). She comes across as intelligent yet very sexy, but in a more athletic or graceful way. How much thought went into her creation?
AP: We have spent the last five years crafting Rynn's look and personality. Arokh was the first character we created for the game. We wanted the player's character to play off of Arokh. The logical choice was to have a female whose grace and athleticism would compliment a dragon's raw power. This theme has evolved over time. Scott , our lead animator, spent a lot of time perfecting Rynn's movement to convey both power and grace. Beyond just looks and movement, we spent a tremendous amount of time developing Rynn's personality. The depth of the plot and the addition of the player controlled conversation system allowed us to explore different aspects of Rynn's personality.

Hypothetically, of course, who would you choose to play her in the movie? Should we start looking forward to the action figures?
AP: If I could cast anybody as Rynn, it would have to be Elizabeth Hurley. She is obviously quite beautiful and has the same sort of attitude as Rynn. Whether she is as athletic as Rynn is anybody's guess! As far as action figures go...wow, I never thought of that. It would be very cool to see a Rynn and Arokh action figure.

Seriously, the game has mass appeal. Do you think its introduction to the console will result in a series of games? You've got the theme nailed.
AP: I certainly hope so. It all depends on how the game is received by the public.

The music is like something straight out of a Hollywood epic. Was it done in-house?
AP: We contracted Erik Aho for Music Design Network who did an absolutely incredible job. **play**

PS2

DRAKAN: The Ancient Gates

play rating

developer: surreal software publisher: scea available: feb.

Drakan is the finest adventure of its kind, combining elements of Tomb Raider, the Soul Reaver series, and games like Panzer Dragoon. It feels as magical as it looks.

BEAUTIFUL FANTASY

Square's artistic mastery soars yet again, draping the screen with enchantment and wonder.

Final Fantasy X is a visual stunner, an artistic and technical achievement that delivers one breathtaking moment after another. The exquisitely detailed creatures that consume the screen with their massive, gloriously conceived forms. The sprawling cities, existing in a time and place of pure, wonderful fantasy, swirling in vibrant streams of color and texture. The towering cinematic presentation, the way the story and action is connected and elevated by enchanting CG sequences: marvel as Yuna, the innocent neophyte summoner, dances on water as she extracts the souls of the dead entombed below; watch in amazement as a writing beast violently sheds its shackles to wage battle.

Should we be surprised, anything less than expectably satisfied, that the tenth chapter in the devoutly followed *Final Fantasy* tome—an interactive storybook created by scores of talented designers fed by millions of dollars and inspired by remarkable tradition—is filled with indelible moments that capture the imagination?

Part of the pleasure of any *Final Fantasy* game has always been the rich presentation that pushes the boundaries of the time, and here we are again. But what marks a great RPG, what has always been paramount to the *Final Fantasy* series, is the depth and engaging energy of its story, characters and battle. With its speedy new combat that replaces the aging active-time battles with what is essentially a turn-based system powered by a few good twists—party members can be switched in and out at will, Aeon creatures can be summoned to fight solo—*Final Fantasy X* does well by sticking with at least part of that tradition, introducing some of the best confrontations yet. But where the game gets infected is in the venomous banality of its story, a contrived and awkward tale of a malevolent presence called Sin that lives to consume the world. Allusions to the Biblical arc of good and evil and attempts at metaphorical undercurrents fall flat, and the central love story between the summoner Luna and the boorish, juvenile, cantankerous hero Tidus is a painful stretch. Credit the strength of the game's compelling visual storytelling and skillfully staged drama for tapping more emotion than otherwise would exist.

A big source of the problems is the distressingly spoken dialogue that has replaced the familiar reams of written text. Most of the voice acting is competent, but Tidus has such a whiny, wildly misplaced voice that nearly all his scenes become a drag. In the past, the drama came partly from the character movements and our own interpretation of the scene. Now we must listen to average actors and be jarred by robotic character movements. Facial details are striking and the characters look great, but watch them move and you lose the connection to the game's reality. What results is a cartoon tone that leaches the desired effect of a serious, deep state of emotion. And yet despite all the blunders, *Final Fantasy X* is often a compelling journey so majestic in its imagery that we are carried excitingly along to the game's conclusion.

BRADY FIECHTER

Part of the pleasure of any Final Fantasy game has always been the rich presentation that pushes the boundaries of the time, and here we are again

Once again, Square creates a beautifully complete world that is alive with wonderful sights.

PS2

FINAL FANTASY X

play rating

developer: square publisher: square available: now

Despite all the blunders, Final Fantasy X is often a compelling journey so majestic in its imagery that we are carried excitingly along to the game's conclusion

THE LOST ARC

At long last, three classic RPGs come stateside in the historic Arc the Lad Collection

The PlayStation's role-playing legacy is undeniable. Fantastic stories, spellbinding adventures, original quests and the latest enhancement of million-selling franchises have established the old PS as the premier system for the genre. Which makes it ironic that only now, as enthusiasts trade in their old, gray boxes for shiny, new PS2s and whatever else, one of the series that began that legacy in Japan is finally hitting the U.S. with Working Designs' Arc the Lad Collection.

More than just a domestic release of some of the most requested games to never hit the States, Arc Collection packs all three Arc the Lad titles and more into a six-disc, 100-hour-plus giga-epic that defines the term "Collectors' Edition."

CHAPTER I

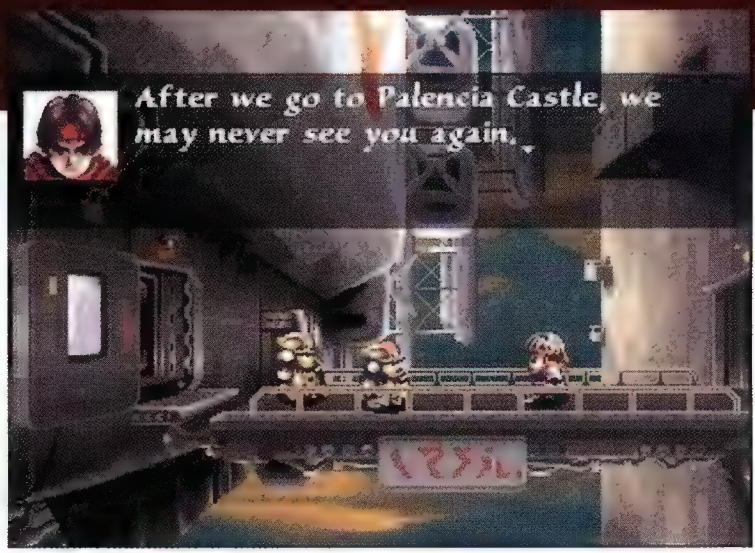
Though more of a prologue for the adventures to come, Arc the Lad, originally released in 1995, is must-play gaming for anyone planning to undertake such a massive quest. Arc 1 sets the tone and look of the games that follow, plus it establishes a unique, enjoyable battle system. Random enemies are non-existent, replaced by predetermined, large-scale battles where positioning characters and navigating terrain mean everything. Aside from this strategy vibe, though, the gameplay is rather unspectacular, as there are no shops, no villages, and only one true dungeon to navigate. You won't be playing this game for the visuals either, as the 2D hand-drawn sprites and backgrounds, though exuding personality, look their age. Instead, play Arc 1 for the fantastic translation, gripping story and colorful characterization. Then pass it along to your younger siblings, since the simple mechanics and 10-hour quest make it ideal for first-time role-players.

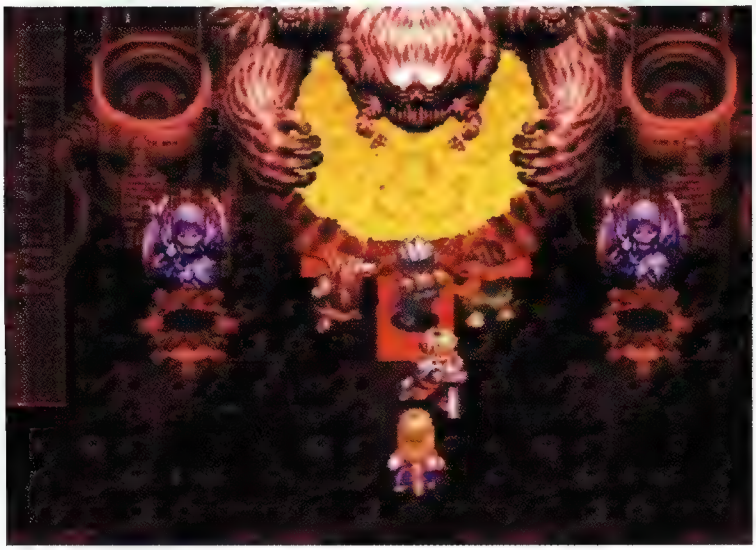
CHAPTER II

If Arc 1 was the appetizer, then Arc 2 is nothing less than a feast. While the classic visual style and involved battles (and a few of the tunes) are retained from the original, everything else about Arc 2 has been pumped to Schwarzenegger-type levels. A new protagonist leads the way into a truly epic storyline that reveals the events in Arc 1 to be a mere microcosm of a much larger plan. More typical of what you'd expect from an RPG, Arc 2 is busting with shops and dungeons, along with overworlds upon overworlds that make the game just plain vast. An innovative level-up system for weapons adds even more strategy to fighting, while over a dozen playable characters keep that variety level high. Additionally, there are tons of optional side quests and a monster-capturing ability that's far more fun and useful than you-know-what-mon ever was. The battles do get tiresome (too much blocking and counterattacking!), the inventory system is weak and there's the odd oversight of not being able to use healing spells outside of combat, but if deep gameplay and great storytelling are what you're seeking, Arc 2 has 'em in droves.

CHAPTER III

Arc 3, on a technical level, blows the previous two games out





Timeless visuals, together with a spectacular box set make Arc the hottest thing going on the steadfast PS o ne.

of the water. Hi-res sprites, 3D backgrounds and excellent FMV look as good as any 32-bit RPG out there. Merged with the essential gameplay elements and characters from the previous chapters and a new direction in the story, Arc 3 is arguably the definitive game in the set. The exceptional translation and an innovative if distracting mission-based format keep it from being a me-too RPG, while the lighthearted adventuring is a nice change of pace. The gameplay oversights from Arc 1 and 2 have even been corrected, although navigating battlefields is slightly more taxing in non-rotating 3D. Even casual RPG fans who don't appreciate the old-school charm of the previous chapters will find a lot to enjoy in the highly polished Arc 3.

Combine these three full RPGs with the Arc Arena bonus game (think Pokemon Stadium), the Making of Arc Collection CD, the character standees, deluxe manual and whatever else WD can cram into the box, and you have a piece of gaming history. The games each deserve praise on their own merits (even though better RPGs exist on the old PS1), but as a premium package it's almost irresistible. If you don't give a darn about the extras, take this score as it is; hardcore RPG fans should add another star to the score and reserve a copy immediately.

CHRIS HOFFMAN

PlayStation

ARC COLLECTION play rating ●●●●○○

developer: Arc Development publisher: Working Designs available: Q1

Another spectacular collection from Working Designs. One can only hope that their upcoming PS2 games exhibit the same dedication to quality. Something tells us it goes without saying.

MOTO HEAD

Namco returns to familiar territory with their latest racer

There's nothing quite like a Namco racing game. The level of polish and visual sophistication on display in games like Ridge Racer V and the original Moto GP are peerless. It's the same story with Moto GP2.

A straightforward sequel, Namco's latest continues to set the standard in superbike simulation on console. There are twice as many courses as in the first game, bringing the total number to ten, and there are some sterling additions here. Germany's Sachsenring is a fantastic course, full of great turns and dramatic elevation changes. Also new is France's Le Mans circuit and the Netherland's Assen, which is a killer technical circuit. As with all the returning tracks like Suzuka and Donington Park, these new venues are great to look at, with breathtaking vistas and superb attention to detail, like moving camera cranes and fireworks from the crowd.

Gameplay is much as it was, but with a few new tweaks. An action button has been added, which allows you to pop wheelies and pump your fist as you cross the finish line, and in simulation mode, you now have to pull back on the analog stick to lift your rider's body up for air-braking. But perhaps the biggest addition comes in the form of variable weather. Rain is now an option in Moto GP, and it's a visual treat. The circuits become slick and shiny, and in first-person view, there is this great water distortion effect on your visor.

Moto GP2 is another highly accomplished Namco effort that will deeply satisfy fans of the original. I doubt, however, that the game will find an audience much beyond this, simply because, like the first one, it doesn't offer the same sort of dynamic satisfaction and excitement as something like Ridge Racer. Similar to a Formula 1 game, Moto GP is a game of precision. It's all about early braking and apex kissing, which is great, but not for those looking for obvious thrills.

TIMOTHY PIKE

PS2

MOTO GP2

play rating

developer: namco publisher: namco available: now

Moto GP fans will adore this sequel which features twice as many courses as the original and a nice selection of enhancements. As accomplished as it is, however, it's still not for everyone.

BLADE RUNNER

Minor design flaws keep Air Blade from greatness, but it's a beautiful ride

Take any incarnation of T-Hawk, throw in the hover board from Back to the Future along with a Fincher-esque interface, and Namco's latest acquisition, AirBlade, begins to come into focus. In the game's story mode, you play as Ethan Palmer, controlling the AirBlade, the prototype anti-gravity hoverboard his pal Oscar developed and then decided to heist when the sleazy GCP Corp. prematurely terminated his contract. The GCP wants his technology to drive up their stock price; Ethan wants it to complete a series of timed missions. The GCP follows Oscar home, kick his ass real good, and holds him hostage while Ethan and his buddies make off with the amazing Blade and begin to unravel the whole sorted mess.

The goal in each of the six missions revolves around ditching the CGP thugs—their cameras, helicopters, security, etc.—while Kat, a cool hacker chick, guides you to your next destination and assists you with valuable intel. The game's graphics warrant a party in their honor, and the gameplay is fluid, humming along at 60-fps all the time along with some awesome animation. And yet I hear a fly hovering over a vat of ointment.

The missions take you, literally, all over a massive metropolis that makes the likes of Mirra and T-Hawk run home to momma. Flying across lofty perches, grinding on trucks, satellite dishes, and everything else with an edge, Ethan takes shredding to the next level. He swings on poles, crashes through neon billboards and bashes baddies with the butt of his board. Criterion makes the most of their brilliantly assembled real estate; then the fly lands, as soon as you realize you're being timed. Time limits, 99% of the time, equal fun impediment, and that has never rung truer here. The problem isn't even so much that the missions are timed but in the amount they give you, coupled with an annoying and unnecessary "boost" feature. The AirBlade uses boost to gain the speed and loft needed to execute most of each missions tougher objectives, and it runs out very quickly. The only way to replenish boost is to perform simple tricks, which is easy enough, but it consumes valuable seconds and impedes the game's flow. So the game needs either unlimited boost or longer time limits. Either one would have boosted its playability considerably. The way it's set up, you're forced to endure countless do-overs until you have each massive area thoroughly committed to memory. There's no time for goofing off or letting it rip like there was in Jet Grind Radio; no time to enjoy your amazing surroundings.

That said, I still found AirBlade well worth sticking with even though that old Criterion Trademark rears its ugly head in the game's Industrial district. Anyone remember the last course in Trickstyle? They have a way of implementing nonsensical little hitches in the gameplay where you have to hit something so perfect that even the best player will end up testing the Dual Analog's crumple zones. If you fail to complete a mission in its entirety, you have to play the whole five minutes over, just to have another stab at perhaps the last move.

The pay-off for living through story mode—new playable characters and levels—is quite the carrot, and there's plenty of multiplayer fun to be had in Party mode, like Airborne Tag and Score Attack. But make no mistake: you will need to brave some frustrating moments to enjoy the breadth of AirBlade.

DAVE HALVERSON

PS2

AIRBLADE

play rating

developer: criterion publisher: namco available: now

If you can survive the learning curve, Air Blade is a ride worth taking. Stunning visuals, a cool story, and swift framerates make for an impressive scoot—if you can deal with the difficulty.

TAKE YOUR PIK

With Pikmin, Miyamoto once again proves why his genius does not revolve solely around Mario and Zelda

"Like Miyamoto's best works, Pikmin has an almost intangible addictiveness"

*shown larger than life-size for illustrative purposes only

"Pikmin? What is Miyamoto on? Where's the new Mario game?" Such phrases floated about when Pikmin was first demoed at last year's E3. People seemed to be upset that Miyamoto had an original idea for the Gamecube launch, as opposed to a shiny new version of Mario 64. How narrow some can people be. I didn't know if anyone still remembered, but there was a time when Mario was an original creation, and like most true artists, Miyamoto can't be that interested in covering old ground.

Now, let me get off my high horse here and offer that little could have pleased me more than to see a high spec Mario demo running on Gamecube last E3, but I was overjoyed to see Pikmin. However, with little chance to fully immerse myself in the idea at a noisy trade show, I had to make the assumption that the game would be brilliant once I actually sat down at home and played the game properly.

As it happens, I was correct. Pikmin is brilliant. It's a little difficult to describe, as straight explanation tends to make the game sound rather less than interesting, but I'll do my best here. Pikmin details the plight of Captain Olimar, a tiny little thumb-sized alien that has crash landed on a strange world. With the parts of his space ship scattered about the land, he enlists the help of Pikmin, equally diminutive creatures which he finds he can control. There are three types of Pikmin; blue, yellow, and red. Blue ones can swim, yellow ones can throw little bombs scattered throughout, and red ones are like worker ants. Though the number of Pikmin is very limited in the beginning, with each type only having one member to start with, Captain Olimar is able to hatch more and more by directing the Pikmin to carry hatch packs and defeated bugs of various size to each of the Pikmins' hatcheries. Soon, there are dozens and dozens of Pikmin at his command (he can control up to one hundred in the field), and he's going to need them all, as his air supply is only good for 30 days on this strange new world, and there are thirty ship parts to recover.

So that's the set-up in a nutshell. Does it sound fun? Perhaps not, but it truly is. Moving Captain Olimar through the amazing looking environments while a hundred little Pikmin trail after you awaiting your command is a terrific sensation. And the levels are full of discovery as you explore them working out how to use your various Pikmin to clear obstacles, defeat enemies, and carry the scattered space ship parts back to the waiting ship.

As expected, all the subjective qualities of the game are perfect, from the detail of the environments to the music, even down to the little sound that is emitted when you control the Pikmin group en masse with the yellow analog stick.

Like Miyamoto's best works, Pikmin has an almost intangible addictiveness. When you're not playing it, you're thinking about it. Indeed, it's the kind of game that you find yourself playing in your head as you fall asleep at night, counting Pikmin, as it were.

PETER GARDEN

NINTENDO GAMECUBE.

PIKMIN — play rating

developer: nintendo | publisher: nintendo | available: now

Truly original and truly wonderful, Shigeru Miyamoto's Pikmin will probably be overlooked by most. What a shame, as it is undeniably one of his finest works to date.

REZ

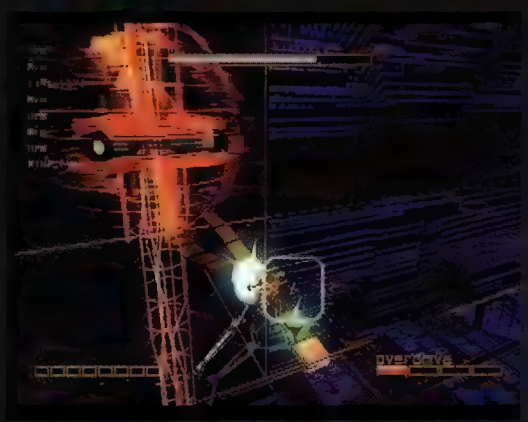
Tetsuya Mizuguchi, the talented mind behind Sega Rally and Space Channel 5, has just delivered a minor masterpiece. His latest effort is called Rez, and it is quite simply one of the most refreshing and enjoyable shooters I've played in years.

Like most good things, the idea behind Rez is simple: you shoot, you make music. Utilizing a classic lock-on system, you target enemies and release your shots, and every time you hit something, it adds a tiny rhythmic or melodic element to the underlying beat. Everything is kept in sync, so the sound never becomes a sloppy cacophony. Instead, targeting a horde of enemies and unleashing your shot creates these awesome little snippets of electronic music. It's a truly inspired idea that works incredibly well.

And it's so much more than a gimmick because the basic shooting action is very, very good, with terrific enemy patterns and bosses. And then there are the graphics. In the best lysergic tradition of Tempest 2000, Rez is a deeply surreal and trippy looking game. Abstract forms polygonal forms and blooming colors assault your senses like a Tron fever dream.

Rez is a game that must be experienced by anyone who like shooters, electronic music, or the surreal. If, like me, you like all these things this game is an absolute must have.

PETER GARDEN



"... quite simply one of the most refreshing and enjoyable shooters I've played in years"

developer: sega/uga
publisher: sega
available: now

play rating

SUPER SMASH BROS. MELEE

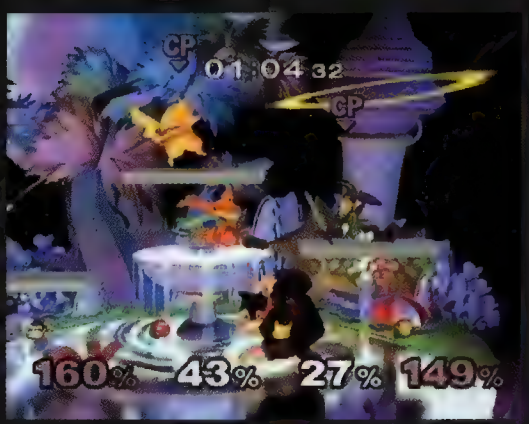
There are so many classic Nintendo cues in Super Smash Bros. Melee, it almost made me cry. The settings, music, and characters recall over twenty years of Nintendo history, and the nostalgic resonance was overwhelming. As an added bonus, the game itself is mega.

Quite similar to the N64 original, Super Smash Bros. Melee benefits most obviously from the unique strengths of the Gamecube hardware. Immediately impressive are the character models, which are rich in detail and wonderfully animated. And the environments are alive with color and activity, like the raging waterfall of Donkey Kong's stage and the classic-looking Super Mario stage.

But it's in the gameplay where Melee really shines. The control setup is simple, making use of really only two buttons, but combinations of analog stick movement and button presses yield a great variety of moves, with every character commanding a highly unique set of skills. And the levels are strewn with offensive and defensive items, adding yet another layer of excitement to the typically manic four player battles.

And unlike most fighters, there is a very satisfying one player game here. The fantastic Adventure mode throws you into these amazing situational battles, some of which feature these little mini side scrolling levels which will leave you gagging for a new Mario or Metroid game of the 2D variety.

TIMOTHY PIKE



"There are so many classic Nintendo cues in Super Smash Bros. Melee, I almost cried."

developer: hal/nintendo
publisher: nintendo
available: now

play rating

DARK SUMMIT

That chocolate Hanz gave you? Well, it may have looked like a bar, but it wasn't chocolate. Find an outhouse...fast." Thirty percent or so into THQ's Dark Summit, in which a gang of rebellious snowboarders try to discover what a covert Shadow Organization is doing on their mountain, a rival snowboarder, the irksome Hanz, slips the titular female lead, Naya, a little chocolate surprise. The first ever diarrhea dash in a video game ensues. There's a lot of originality in Dark Summit. Sure, task-based gameplay is nothing new, but in a story format on snowboards, where tricks earn you gear and completing objective's gets you forged ski passes—now that's original. And we're not talking like "spell Naya" or crap like that. While the usual perform-ten-combos stuff is in here, the majority of missions pertain to the story. As for Naya, well, I'm not wild about those bangs, but she does have nice moguls.

DAVE HALVERSON

XBOX

developer: radical ent.
publisher: thq
available: now

play rating

RICKY CARMICHAEL

RC MX 2002, arguably the best motocross game around (MX Rider gives it a run for its money) shines on the Xbox, just as it does on the PS2. There are subtle differences here and there, mainly pertaining to the color palette, but otherwise, the game remains the same. The secret is in the controls: Left shoulder clutch, right shoulder boost. Using them correctly along with the right gas and braking, the game has a groove all its own, along with killer visuals to match. Carbon copies of the real thing, the courses look and feel authentic (because they are), and the attention to detail is extraordinary. Little chunks of Ghia (little FF joke there), each a little polygonal cube, spray from the tires, you can all but smell the exhaust, and the sound effects are pretty much dead on. well, gotta leave something for the sequel.

DAVE HALVERSON

XBOX

developer: pacific coast power and light
publisher: thq
available: now

play rating

GRAND THEFT AUTO 3

Freedom is the name of this game, featuring a downtown playscape so massively intricate that players can literally do whatever they want, whenever they want. Sure, the character models and textures would benefit greatly from an upgrade (the inner city river barely splashes), but graphics aren't really a concern in GTA3. Unlike its predecessors, this third installment is tapped into a 3D world—and the gloves are off. As you climb the ranks of a Mafioso crime ring, one mission has you driving the kingpin's girl to the waterfront to buy heroine. Then, while at a rave, the heat bust in—so you have to drive her back safely with S.W.A.T. riding your tail. Pimps, prostitutes, prophylactics and PCP all contribute to the game's lewd storyline, offering any mature gamer—and even those who don't generally play games—a perfect retreat.

JON M GIBSON

PS2

developer: dma
publisher: rockstar
available: now

play rating

XTREME G3

Acclaim's best racing game to date, XG3 Racing, benefits from its bid on the Gamecube with a slightly more solid and softer visual presentation, a slightly zoomed out camera that sits a little farther behind the bikes, and a few special touches on the interface. And that's just in the single-player mode. The boys at Cheltenham have also added a four-player split-screen experience that'll make that big screen investment seem ever so worthwhile. The end product is a futuristic racer with no equal. Once you enter the higher classes—500g on up (sonic boom country—it's a religious experience. This must be what it's like to be a Hot Wheel—a really really fast Hot Wheel. The balance between set-up and deployment, along with the intense speeds and hot Euro design, make for a racing experience that'd blow Kojack's hair back.

DAVE HALVERSON

NINTENDO GAMECUBE

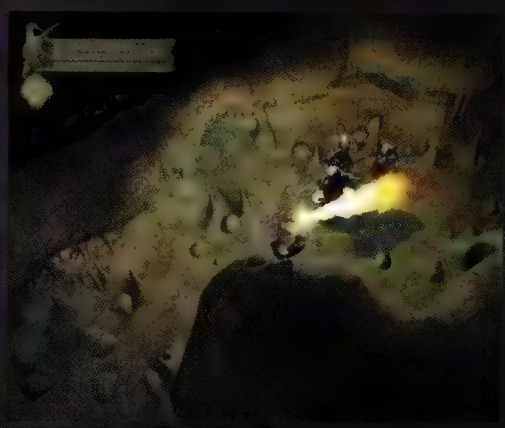
developer: acclaim cheltenham
publisher: acclaim
available: now

play rating

BALDUR'S GATE: DARK ALLIANCE

Writing a capsule review on Baldur's Gate is like trying to find a spot for the Xbox on your entertainment rack: There's just not enough room. Simply put, this is top-down action-role-playing at its very finest. From the astonishing water physics to unbelievably crisp and detailed visuals to the hottest female lead on the planet (you can strip her down to her tiny G-String and bikini top and see for yourself), Dark Alliance is the best of the breed. With the game's weight- sensitive weapon and armor management, an immense magic system, a compelling interactive story, three diverse playable characters, intense boss battles, and two-player co-op play, Black Isle Studios threw it all in the pot. The character models, from the pub owner on down, are all respectively and unmistakably D&D, the music is ominous, and the terrain is presented in such a way that you'll never look at texture maps the same way again. A superb game.

DAVE HALVERSON



Notice the detailed weapon and armor system? I spent half the game in here... you know, getting everything just right

PS2

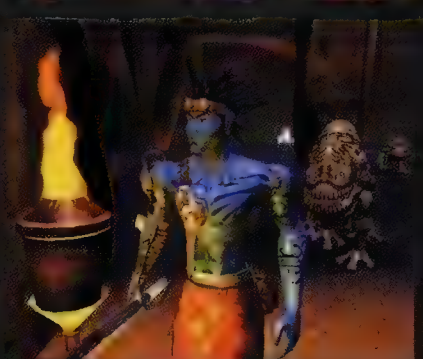
developer:black isle
publisher: interplay
available: now

play rating

AZURIK

I have mixed feelings about Azurik. On the one hand it's a somewhat attractive action adventure, epic in scope with a hint of originality. On the other, it has the tell-tale signs of a first-generation effort. Azurik himself doesn't feel connected to the ground, there's mild clipping, and the framerate dips when the environments open up. It's also home to some of the most pathetic voice acting I've ever heard. Anyone outside of the lead characters (especially villagers) sound eerily monotone. The save function also leaves much to be desired; saves on the fly like in Halo would have been nice. In the end, however, decent creature models, an advanced weapon and armor system, and blue skin cannot make up for the game's utterly confusing gameplay. You spend most of your time in this game trying to figure out where the heck you're supposed to be. It's just poor design.

DAVE HALVERSON



XBOX

developer: adrenium
publisher: microsoft
available: now

play rating

SHREK

I'll say one thing about Shrek: it's a beautiful-looking game. If you've never seen acres of bump mapping before, prepare to be spoiled. It's not a bad-playing little hubber either; at first, coming to terms with the camera (which struggles to keep pace with the action), you may not think so, but once you strike a balance between it, and Shrek's rather jerky control, it's unusually addicting. Much like T-Hawk with an Ogre, each hub plays host to a laundry list of tasks that you must complete to open the next. While Shrek's aren't nearly as technical (he is an ogre after all), the game taps into the residual vibe left over from the movie, so you find yourself gladly doing things over until you prevail. It's not always pretty in execution, and it's a tad glitchy, but if you can look past the smelly parts, Shrek is worth farting around with.

DAVE HALVERSON

XBOX

developer:
publisher: tdk interactive
available: now

play rating

capsule reviews

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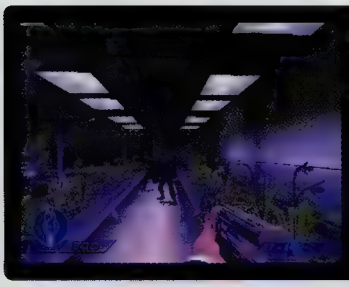


007: AGENT UNDER FIRE

play rating

PS2

developer: ea
publisher: ea
available: now

007 has been criticized for being too basic, offering no innovation or complexity in gameplay. Fair enough, but the way I see it, this frenetically engaging game is so stylized, fast-paced, visually appealing and strongly designed that I loved every second. Driving cool Bond vehicles and popping the enemy with cool Bond guns and deploying cool Bond gadgets while running around cool Bond levels is... you get the picture. This game smokes from start to much-too-abrupt ending. Hurry up with the sequel, please.

BRADY FIECHTER

CEL DAMAGE

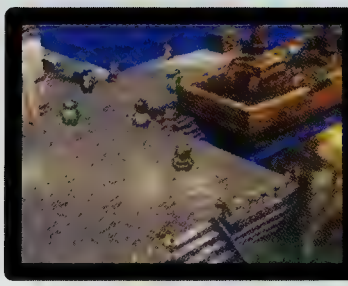
play rating

XBOX

developer: pseudo
publisher: ea
available: now

Cartoons are wackiness, chaos and exaggerated violence all rolled into one, kid-friendly package—so why not translate that into a game? Enter Cel Damage, a graphically pleasing, fairly successful attempt at yet another interactive 'toon. 36 weapons let you beat the living daylights out of your opponents—in Tex Avery mode, complete with mashing hammers and sneaky sinkholes—fueling hours of crafty, playful vehicular combat of the animated kind. Oftentimes, the rigorous climb to 500 points can be met with disappointment but even if just for eye-candy purposes, Cel Damage is plenty amusing.

JON M GIBSON



DRAGON WARRIOR VII

play rating

PlayStation

developer: enix
publisher: enix
available: now

After the first hour or so of playing Japan's most popular PlayStation game of all time, I feared that I would not be able to continue. Dragon Warrior VII looks old and features an interface that dates back to the Famicom (NES). But I hung in there with the game, and am I glad I did. Dragon Warrior VII is a classic RPG, old school look and all. Its overall story, pushed along by a fantastically engaging set of goals is simply impossible to resist and the dungeon design is marvelous, making me recall some of my fonder memories of playing the original Zelda. Not to be missed.

PETER GARDEN

FIFA 2002

play rating

NINTENDO GAMECUBE

developer: ea
publisher: ea
available: now

Is FIFA 2002 the best modern soccer game? Not quite, but this latest edition, reviewed here for Gamecube, is much closer than previous incarnations. The problem many had with previous FIFAs was the game's intense arcade slant where many actions were automated, making it very easy, for instance, to score. That's changed with FIFA 2002, as there is now a lot of manual control in the game, making shooting and passing a far more skillful affair. Unfortunately, EA has taken out some footwork moves which were always a lot of fun, but the enhanced graphics and tweaked play make up for it. Still, FIFA has not yet reached the standard of Konami's Winning Eleven 5.

PETER GARDEN

F1 2001

play rating

XBOX

developer: ea
publisher: ea
available: now

My quest for the perfect Formula One game continues, and with EA's F1 2001 for Xbox, I think I'm closer now than I've ever been. EA's series has always been pretty good, striking a great balance between realism and fun. But on the Xbox, the series has taken a huge graphical leap forward. For the first time in any F1 game, the tires now look real, with proper rounded shoulders and synthetic rubber sheen. A small detail, to be sure, but an example of how this game has upped the graphic standard in every way. And there is a greatly enhanced sense of speed on offer here, giving you the true feeling of 850 horsepower. This is the best F1 game you can get.

TIMOTHY PIKE

HALF LIFE

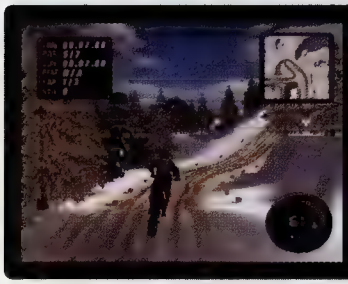
play rating

PS2

developer: gearbox
publisher: sierra
available: now

First-person shooters transferred from the PC to console—a Defcon 5 scenario for the hardcore fan. Endless debates and whiny bickering are inevitable. But both classes should shake on a truce after seeing Gearbox's excellent PS2 conversion of Half-Life. There aren't many control issues, seeing as a USB keyboard/mouse option has been installed, and an exclusive episode has been added for freshness. And considering the original game has aged four years, the graphics have also been the recipient of an overhaul. Sure, there are no endless nights of online action, and no mods like *Counterstrike* or *Team Fortress* included, but Half-Life has matured with style.

JON M GIBSON



JEREMY MCGRATH SXW

play rating

PS2

developer: acclaim
publisher: acclaim
available: now

Barely anything goes right in this half-baked excuse for a racing game. The third painful installment in the McGrath series, this one proves once and for all that this guy would put his name on a Yugo if the price was right. The main problem (of the many) is the terrain, which is rolled out before you like carpeting -- a flat texture rolled over smooth humps and hills. Then, of course, there's the pop-up, frantic and unrealistic pacing, and completely disconnected gameplay. A couple of things actually go right: the rider/bike models are nice, and the Baja mode—an all-out free roaming rally—is okay too. But it's not nearly enough to warrant a purchase.

DAVE HALVERSON

OBI WAN

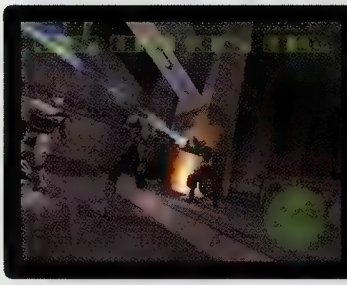
play rating

XBOX

developer: lucasarts
publisher: lucasarts
available: now

After the high of the Factor 5-developed Rogue Leader on Gamecube, Obi Wan for Xbox is a bit of a letdown. Chief among its problems is an unconvincing graphic presentation. The character models are basic and unattractive, and the environments are a touch bland–not what we've come to expect from the Xbox. The control is also lacking, missing out on the sort of precision and fluidity that a third person action game requires. Obi Wan's one saving grace is the thrill of swinging the light sabre around, cutting down battle droids. The sound effect is perfect, and using the right analog stick to control the sabre is a good idea.

PETER GARDEN



PROJECT EDEN

play rating

PS2

developer: core
publisher: eidos
available: now

Descending the many labyrinthine layers of a future world crumbling from within, you assume the identity of four crime busters, employing their unique, individual skills to solve puzzles and take out the opposition. Commanding a squad of four fuses a unique and entertaining change to the otherwise familiar action, and the mammoth levels and complex tasks keep you involved in Project Eden's shadowy settings. I liked this game, but wanted more than what felt like a project that was meant for the original PlayStation; perhaps a sequel with a cleaner look and feel?

BRADY FIECHTER

SMUGGLER'S RUN 2: HT

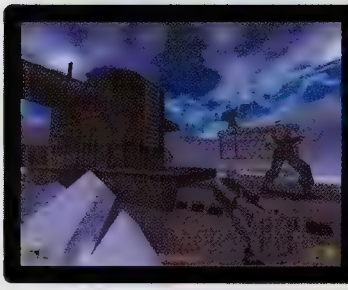
play rating

PS2

developer: angel
publisher: rockstar
available: now

Without sounding too cliché, if you liked Smuggler's Run, you'll love the sequel, Hostile Territory, a more fleshed-out and detailed take on the crime-actually-can-pay premise. The game's engine, which seemed a marvel when the PS2 launched, still comes off as exceptional—the added detail and effects haven't slowed it down a bit, and you can still see forever. The missions present much more in terms of diversity as well, and the game has an ongoing storyline with a mentor of sorts barking out commands as you ascend through the ranks. The only problem I have with HT is the certifiable Five-O. Holy frijole!

DAVE HALVERSON



SOLIDER OF FORTUNE

play rating

PS2

developer: majesco
publisher: majesco
available: now

First-person shooters are a popular convention (just look at the holiday line-up)—but some are lively, some are poor. Soldier of Fortune has a reasonably unique concept—26 different "gore zones," allowing players to obliterate an enemy's arm, forcing him to clasp the open wound; or tap out his kneecap—he'll collapse and gasp for help. But the game feels more like a PC port than a solid PS2 title. The frame-rate clicks in at a slow 30-fps the controls are shifty, and the graphics are ordinary. Red Faction and Agent under Fire breath more life into the genre.

PETER GARDEN

SSX TRICKY

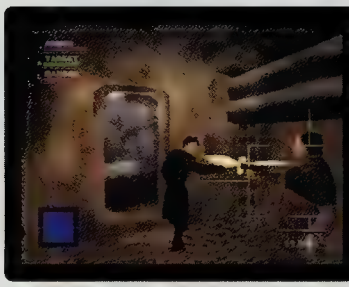
play rating

PS2

developer: ea
publisher: ea
available: now

Since sir-ralph-alot (long story) couldn't put this one in to words, here's the lowdown on SSX Tricky. Imagine last year's model taken to the extreme, with even crazier courses, an entirely new bag of tricks and an array of Hollyweird talent behind the already beautifully modelled mugs. An equal opportunity shredder, Tricky derives as much replay power from its personality as it does its graphics and gameplay. It's not quite the shocker it was last year before we'd ever seen one like it, but in terms of a pure downhill rush it's still the game to beat.

DAVE HALVERSON



SYPHON FILTER 3

play rating

PlayStation

developer: eidetic
publisher: scea
available: now

What might be the last game many will consider buying for the PSone, Syphon Filter 3 marks the return of gun-toting action—Gabe Logan style. While you get to control some new characters and fire some nifty weapons, this release is strikingly similar to the prequels in its presentation and gameplay: travel the world, meet interesting people—and kill them. Scenarios range from Montana militia compounds to, eerily enough, Kabul. A medium challenge with an all-too-easy ending makes this an excellent rental, and a decent purchase for those waiting for the series to migrate to the PS2.

KIM PARK

TOP GUN

play rating

PS2

developer: digital integration
publisher: titus
available: now

While I believe Top Gun may be okay for aficionados, I found the early Academy missions too laborious, given that they're meant to serve as a precursor to the actual Warzone levels. Training should be a breeze, an opportunity for the player to get familiar with the controls, and nothing more. Giving me six bombs to take out like 16 targets in seven minutes, leaving me to chip away at the rest, is not cool. As much as I really like the way the game looks, feels, and sounds I just couldn't hang. This is not a jump-right-in-and-take-out-bogies type of game. I'd have enjoyed any movie tie-ins as well, like Michael Ironside barking out the mission briefings.

DAVE HALVERSON

TWISTED METAL SM BRAWL

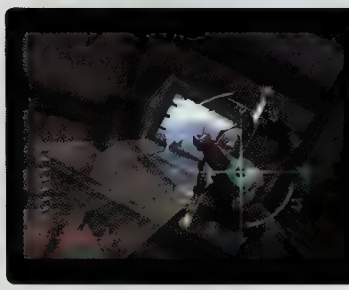
play rating

PlayStation

developer: incognito
publisher: scea
available: march

A rotten kid's RC car tournament, Small Brawl puts you in control of a series of ghastly RC cars spawned from the seed of Twisted Metal's band of fabulous freaks. As you can imagine, you race around dual analog style (is there any other way) picking up and launching a quiver of rockets, missiles and assorted instruments of bad will in the hopes of smashing your foes, and eventually massive boss vehicles. The arenas start on the small size, but from the Easy Death Oven on, this is pure TM, only in an exaggerated homestead environment. This must be where Martha Stewart's evil siblings reside. "And that's a very evil thing."

DAVE HALVERSON



VAMPIRE NIGHT

play rating

PS2

developer: namco/sega
publisher: namco
available: now

I had such high hopes for this game. What could be better than a collaboration between two of the finest light gun game makers on the planet, Sega and Namco? I'll tell you what's better: Time Crisis 2 and The House of the Dead. Compared with these exemplary titles, Vampire Night is surprisingly flat. The graphics, though slick, lack the sort of interest I expected and are actually quite bland. And the shooting action itself is rather less than great, with far too many enemies taking the form of little stupid balls that you have to shoot out of the air.

PETER GARDEN

WAVE RALLY

play rating

PS2

developer: opus
publisher: eidos
available: march

Props to the programmer who must tackle the daunting task of creating an engaging, active wave-physics foundation for a racing game on water; it just never seems to work quite right. After returning to the classic, still-impressive Wave Race 64, I have even more respect for what Nintendo accomplished five years ago on the fledgling Nintendo 64, and a little more disappointment for a game like Wave Rally, an unexciting and static racing game that just as easily could have been presented on solid ground with the same effect. Nothing about Wave Rally is wholly incompetent, but there just isn't anything about this game that excites the way a jet-ski racer should.

BRADY FIECHTER

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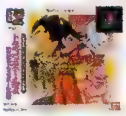
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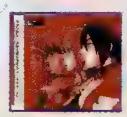
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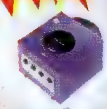

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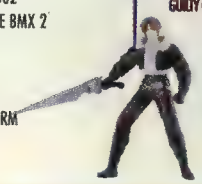

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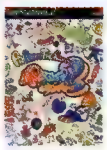
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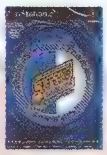
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NOT SO SMALL SONIC

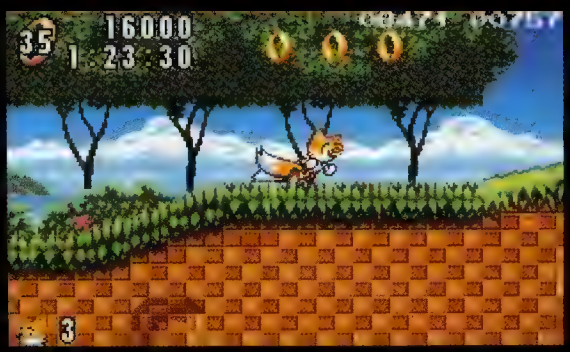
It's all here: the grass vallies, dark factories, vegas skies, and snowy mountains. 2D Sonic is back and he's brought his friends

Most likely the only stab we'll ever get at another 2D Sonic, Sonic Advance is about to roll out…on Nintendo hardware (distributed by the reigning kings of GBA distribution, THQ). The last time Sonic appeared on a portable was on Sega's own ill-fated Game Gear, an 8-bit workhouse (with a sound chip that probably made earplug stock skyrocket) that eventually succumbed to the power of black and white gaming.

Better yet, this a *32-bit* 2D Sonic. Although there's nothing in the screens that appear to stretch beyond the capabilities of 16–bit, the animation and effects tell a different story. One of the most interesting developments surrounding this version (besides the fact that it's a Nintendo game) is that it's a throwback to 1 and 2 that also involves most of the Dream–cast, along with cute little Chao, which, as everyone knows, I like to smash and kill. Eggman, or as us yanks like to call him, Robotnik, reprises his role as the bad guy (I hear he got 20 million) and the game includes mostly familiar but some new puzzles and traps.

What will ultimately determine Sonic Advance's value lies in the little touches that separate good from great. The music and gameplay combination that Yuji Naka struck in 1 and 2 was magical. I've only started playing Sonic Advance and so far it feels like a souped up version of the original, which is great! We'll of course have a full review next month. Sonic Advance also supports four-player mode with one cart. It's a no brainer: buy any way you slice it.

DAVE HALVERSON



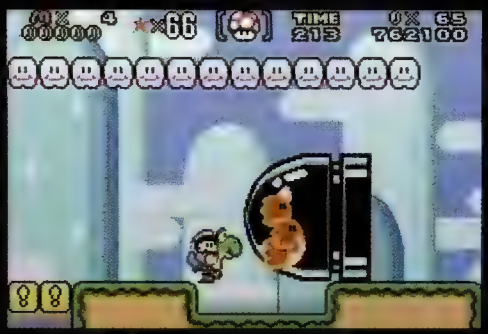
SONIC ADVENTURE GBA — preview

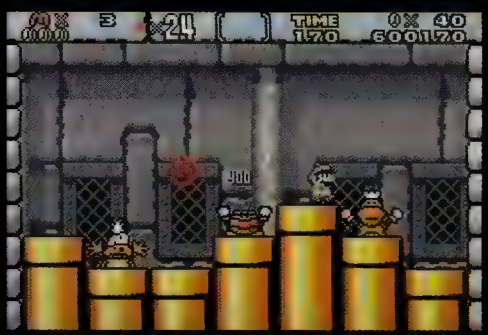
GAME BOY ADVANCE

developer: sega publisher: thq available: now

I've only started playing Sonic Advance and so far it feels like a souped up version of the original, which is great

SUPER MARIO ADVANCE 2





As special a game Pikmin is, and it is, nothing matches the feeling of an all-new original Mario. For me, the real Gamecube launch will take place when that Mario Sunshine finally comes out. In the meantime, the Game Boy Advance is getting the next best thing, Super Mario World 2—the game that launched a million SNES's, and arguably the best Mario game to date. I consider it in a dead heat with Super Mario 64. This game transcends age, time, and hardware by combining platforming at its very finest (the game practically defined it), along with Yoshi's first appearance, and some of the most rhythmically assembled levels ever. The game allows the beginner to mosey, and the professional to seep, into the zone until the world outside just totally shuts off. That's the magic of Miyamoto. With its candy striped mountains, peek-a-boo ghosts and perfectly matched soundtrack, it's a slice of gaming lore that leaves an indelible mark on anyone who plays it. The "2" in SMW 2 comes with a four-player battle mode, and the inclusion of the original Super Mario with enhanced graphics. Handheld gaming simply cannot get any better.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating

developer: nintendo
publisher: nintendo
available: now

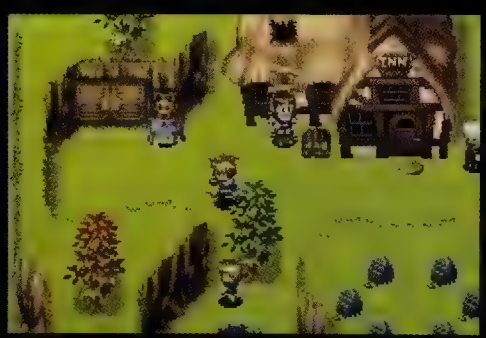
GOLDEN SUN

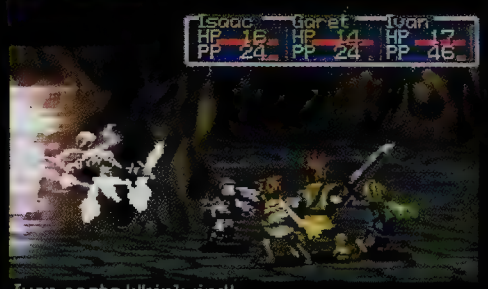
Golden Sun is a throwback to a not-so-distant archetype that, when executed correctly, can still give 3D role playing a run for its money. A hand-drawn RPG incorporating exquisite detail and a blazing new look to battle sequences, it's the best thing to happen to portable role playing perhaps ever. The story covers the usual good-vs.-evil ground with Alchemy and the elements as its hook, but is presented in such a way that you will find yourself drawn into the portable screen like never before, especially with some quality headphones strapped to your head. The sound is nothing short of amazing, easily eclipsing any game on the platform. And, graphically, you'd be hard pressed to find any non-polygonal RPG that compares. Golden Sun is from Camelot, a splinter group from members of the original Climax, authors of the Shining series that began with the 16-bit genre-redefining Shining in the Darkness. They invented comprehensive chatter—a sort of blip language before game machine's could speak—and icon-driven menus. Now they've redefined portable role playing. Your GBA wants you to have this game.

DAVE HALVERSON

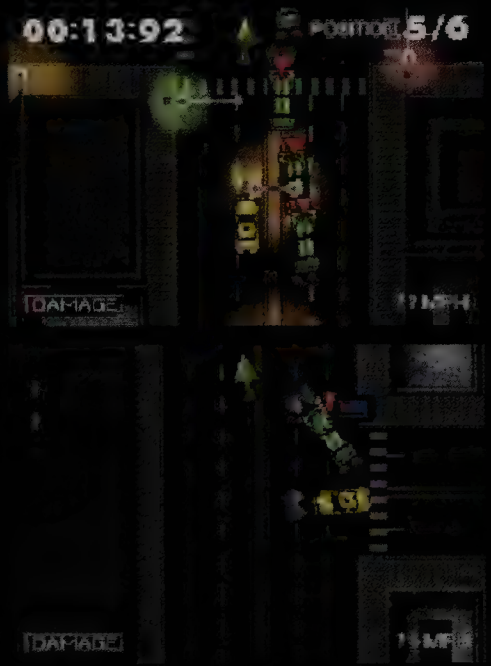
play rating

developer: nintendo
publisher: nintendo
available: now





MIDNIGHT CLUB



Graphically, Midnight Club prevails over the GBA version of Smuggler's Run, yet it still suffers from the same flaws. Aside from losing the enthralling 3D cityscapes of the PS2 version—obviously dumped because handheld horsepower can't support such complexity—a translation issue comes into play again. Probably the most intoxicating aspect of Midnight for the console was freedom during races—players were allowed to deviant from a specified course, resulting in the discovery of short cuts. Here, unless you stay within the given path, you're guaranteed to lose every race. Due to the GBA's screen size, it's extremely difficult to negotiate each course. Instead of pointing to the next checkpoint, the green arrow—supposedly implemented for guidance—points toward the nearest marker, whether you've already passed it or not. As you can imagine, a jumpy navigational tool heeds progress terribly, so players are forced to memorize each course in order to speed across the finish line first.

JON M GIBSON

play rating

developer: rebellion
publisher: destination software
available: 11

PREHISTORIK MAN

Dinosaur Man arrived for the SNES amidst a platform teeming with exclusive software and A titles. Die-hard platform fanatics may have found it, but it never reached the status it deserved at the time. So if you missed the 2D revolution, sign up here. Dinosaur Man succeeds on many levels. First and foremost it's packed with perilous leaps—running leaps, grabbing leaps, and the ever-present falling platform leap. It also has a wonderful cartoon demeanor. From the crabby tribal elder to the big-breasted cave babes and the drooling Cro-Magnon man himself, the game has visuals and personality to burn. This isn't your garden-variety platformer either. It's laden with variety, hidden areas, and diverse gameplay. Dinosaur Man pretty much does his head crackin' with a club, but he can also attack by letting out a mighty yell that'll shake the screws loose on your GBA. Plus the game is drenched in groovy techno beats. The D-Man is no Bonk but he's definitely the next best thing.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating

developer: titus
publisher: titus
available: now

PHALANX

The time seems to be drawing near when we can pretty much forget about getting new 2D shooters on modern consoles. Sure, Treasure has their Radiant Silvergun sequel looming, presumably for the PS2 after a stint in the arcades, but it looks as though the Game Boy Advance will be the last bastion for this once loved, and currently overlooked form of game craft.

The subject of this particular tirade is Phalanx, remake of the SNES shooter of the same name (older readers may remember, if not the game, certainly the bizarre domestic box art featuring the old geezer playing a banjo). Shruken down and wearing its age well, Phalanx remains a decent side scrolling shooter, with an energetic and exciting power-up system, and big detailed graphics.

Phalanx is far from perfect, however. For one, it lacks the finesse and steely intensity of Gradius Galaxies, its most obvious competition, as the game's control and collision are ever so slightly under par. And I have a particular problem with the length of the game's levels. They keep going and going, and you want to enjoy the release of a boss encounter and a brief rest, but you don't get it. At its worst, you simply get a little tired of playing it. Even so, this game is a nice alternative to Gradius. TIMOTHY PIKE

play rating

developer: kemco
publisher: kemco
available: now

SMUGGLER'S RUN 2

Downsize the thrills and graphic power of Smuggler's Run on the PS2—eliminating lush environments and beautiful landscapes—and you get this portable version. But without the processing power of a next-gen console, the idea behind the franchise loses a lot in translation. In 32-bit, there's no longer an advanced physics model to ogle (vehicles don't topple after sharp turns) or visible body damage to admire (a status bar simply states your condition). Both a career mode and "turf war" option are installed to add more play value, but missions quickly become repetitive and frustrating (inaccurate steering is partly to blame). Plus, it doesn't help that the environments are equally redundant (a few randomly placed rocks and trees is hardly variety). Don't get me wrong: It is refreshing to get behind the wheel of this Rebellion-designed racer—to even see it on a handheld is inspiring—however, Mario Kart is built for more extended play; the novelty of Smuggler's Run just doesn't have octane to last.

JON M GIBSON

play rating

developer: rebellion
publisher: destination
available: now

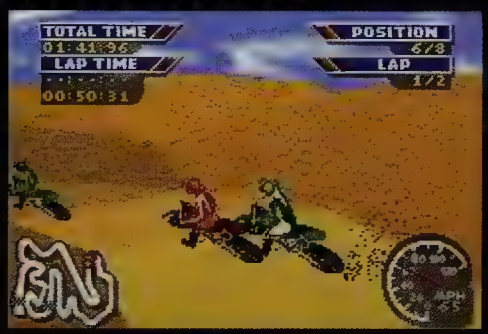
POWERPUFF GIRLS

After their enormously bad outing on Game-Boy Color, my expectations for were nil for the Powerpuff Girl's next outing, Mojo Jojo A-Go-Go (although, you gotta love that title). Imagine my surprise (if only I was a young girl!) when I found a mildly entertaining side scrolling shooter basted with parallax, an array of special powers and combo attacks, and the ability to uproot trees, mailboxes and other pieces of Townsville and knock enemies loopy with 'em. With Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup in tow you take on minions and Mobots, collecting beam and punch upgrades, Chemical X, and other assorted P-girl stuff, while keeping a watchful eye on three energy bars as you hurl forward, rather slowly, attempting to light up a screen load of drones and monkeys dawning brain buckets. Once the puffies lose the will to fight (that's no more energy to you and me), they go bye-bye-bye, and the combo-super attacks, best suited for Mojo boss encounters, go with them. Hide the GBA from Jr.; this one has nailed the visuals from the show down to the last retro lamp post, and sports some nifty between-level snapshot cinemas. The music is even cool, but in a robotic chicky kind of way. That's good mojo. This is a "three" for kids, mind you, so I don't want to hear it!

play rating

developer: sennari
publisher: bam!
available: now

RICKY CARMICHAEL



I can totally appreciate what Tiertex is trying to do with RC MX 2002 on the Advance but, sadly, it seems like a concept better left on hardware designed to push polys. One must go back to Acclaim's ill-fated Dirt Trax on the SNES to find a game to compare. StarFox, Stunt Race, and Dirt Trax all attempted to push polys where only hand-drawn games had gone before, with mixed results. Although effective for the time, by today's standards, they're mere novelties, and this game isn't near the game any of those were by a long-shot. Rider detail, while not bad, is sorely lacking in the animation department, the courses look like shag carpeting, and well, framey doesn't begin to describe the game's sluggish pace. The bikes sound like vacuum cleaners, and the gameplay is set up in way that you have to stay within the parameters of what amounts to a twisty stripe. Not good. Looking at Mirra 2 for GBA, I can't help but think THQ's next entry should be along those lines. Start with the old 8-bit Excitebike and work from there.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating

developer: tiertex
publisher: thq
available: now

MECH PLATOON

Every month, we unwrap a few surprises in the Game Boy universe—but Mech Platoon is probably one of the most unique. Think Command & Conquer in the palm of your hand (yes, that desktop game that took a bulky PC to run has a portable cousin). Platoon is a perfectly executed real-time strategy title, complete with an easy-to-master control set (a must for the limited button capabilities of the GBA) and a plot to match: Four significantly advanced nations wage war with one another on five exotic planets, fighting over nothing else but the rich resources of each locale. The game also employs a new feature that RTS fans will embrace, allowing players to recycle defeated enemy units and use their broken pieces as scrap metal, eventually resulting in the construction of new weapons. Considering there hasn't been a straight-on RTS cartridge under the Advance label, Kemco's foray into the genre is definitely worth enlistment.

JON M GIBSON

play rating

developer: kemco
publisher: kemco
available: now

ECKS AND SEVER

Ecks, an ex-FBI agent, and Sever, a professional assassin, are locked in mortal combat—and the story unfolds to amazing effect in first-person mode. Ecks vs. Sever is, by every degree, the strongest FPS to reach a handheld, far exceeding what the mobile version of Doom set in motion. Variations on levels, for instance, add welcomed variety (players can choose to play as either Ecks or Sever, each with 12 unique, parallel missions); and the frame-rate is solid, considering it was built from the ground up for the GBA (unlike Doom, which was merely resurrected from an early '90s incarnation). Even when linked into a four-player frag fest, the graphics barely stutter. Tight controls (easy strafing and firing), surprisingly effective audio samples (funky techno and realistic gunshots), and smooth character animation (fluid enemy reactions) round out this package.

JON M GIBSON

play rating

developer: crawfish
publisher: bam!
available: now

BROKEN SWORD

Bam! is embracing the handheld market like no other company—just look at their resume: They added flair to the Powerpuff franchise with their latest GBA installment; and Ecks vs. Sever is an unparalleled achievement in way of portable first-person shooters. Now they up the ante again with Broken Sword: The Shadow of the Templars, a beautiful conversion of the first game in the popular PC series. Stunning, hand-drawn backgrounds—almost identical to the original—along with impressive character animation inhabit the screen. The visuals are welcomed, adding depth to the adventure of George Stobbart, an American in Paris who witnesses the theft of an ancient manuscript and the murder of its owner. The plot unravels from there (a la Monkey Island), providing a long overdue escape from the platformers that currently dominate the GBA market.

JON M GIBSON

preview

developer: revolution software
publisher: bam! entertainment
available: now

YOAKE NO MARIKO

developer: sony
publisher: sony
available: now japan

Spumco created the art for Yoake no Mariko, and it shows.

Try to enjoy the world's first voice acting game

How many times have you been pissed off by shoddy dubbing? If you're like me, that would be quite often. Well, Sony has just given us all the chance to put our money where are mouths are. In this latest bit of Japanese strangeness called Yoake no Mariko (roughly translated as Mariko's Daybreak), we have the world's first voice acting game. Using the supplied USB microphone (which is also compatible with Seaman for PS2), you are tasked with providing the voice for a character during several truly bizarre movie scenes, each spoofing a different genre. There's a musical, a horror scene, a bad sitcom, a samurai drama, and a kung fu parody. And thanks to character design by Spumco, your choice of character in each scene is deeply strange. Choose from Rolly, the woman who needs a shave, Jackie, a small black gentleman, or Cap, the Idaho potato man.

With your character selected, the scene begins. On the bottom of the screen is a dialogue prompt showing you which lines you must speak (oh, and by the way, you have to read Japanese to play this game), and then you must deliver your dialogue karaoke style as letters color themselves in. Once spoken, you are graded on the delivery, volume, and timing of your voice. Perform well enough, and the scene continues through several acts. Finally, after all the scenes have played out, you are treated to a replay of your efforts. Unfortunately, this is where the game should get really good, but it doesn't. You see, memory limitations will not allow for your entire set of scenes to play out. Rather, you are shown a sort of commercial for the movie you just dubbed, wherein you hear but brief selections from the bits you just voiced. To make matters worse, the sampling quality is quite low, meaning that your dialogue sounds like AM radio. It's a pity that this game doesn't make use of the PS2 hard drive, as this would allow not only for better voice reproduction, but also for extended replays. I suppose you could record the scenes to tape or DVD as you are acting them out, but this is quite a hassle.

Yoake is a game of hilarious potential, but it doesn't quite make it. Certainly you will laugh the first time you play it, as hearing your voice during the truncated replays is a hoot, but ultimately the game will leave you frustrated and wanting more from the concept.

PETER GARDEN

play rating ● ● ● ● ○

GRAN TURISMO 2001 CONCEPT

developer: polyphony digital
publisher: sony
available: now japan

As if Gran Turismo 3 couldn't get any better, Polyphony Digital has just released an update disc featuring a bevy of Japanese concept cars, most of them unveiled at last year's Tokyo Motor Show. The appropriately titled Gran Turismo Concept gives players the chance to race with truly unobtainable machines, like Honda's Dualnote hybrid-powered super-car, Toyota's wacky Pod, and Daihatsu's little Audi TT knock-off, the Copen. In addition, some recent automotive releases have been included, like Toyota's new Soarer (Lexus SC430) and WiLL VS. As of press, Sony has not announced GT Concept for US release.

JAPAN'S TOP 10 GAMES

(data supplied by dengeki console ranking system)

The hotly anticipated PS2 Gundam game stole the top spot during the week of December 03-09. Kojima's Metal Gear Solid 2 slipped to the no. 2 spot.

1. Mobile Suit Gundam: Federation Vs Zion DX ps2
2. Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty ps
3. Dragon Quest IV ps
4. Super Smash Bros. DX gc
5. Monster Farm Advance gba
6. Growlancer III ps2
7. Magical Vacation gba
8. Baru Shooting Beyblade gba
9. Sakura Taisen GB2: Thunderbolt Operation gb
10. Toro and Holiday ps2

ut by Masahiro Shirow from Intron Depot

072 NOW AND THEN, HERE AND THERE
074 REVOLUTIONARY GIRL UTENA: THE MOVIE
076 LOVE HINA
074 SPRIGGAN
078 PLASTIC JIGGLE
080 VANDREAD
080 GATEKEEPERS
082 SOUL HUNTER
084 ASTRO BOY
086 FLCL
087 ANIME CAPSULE REVIEWS
088 SPIRITED AWAY
090 J-PLAY IMPORTS
091 AI
092 PLAY DATES

NOW AND THEN, HERE AND THERE

central park media • 125 mins

Shu is a stranger in a strange land; he acts with blind aggression. So when he's thrust into a distant, unknown future—a desolate, *Dune*-like environment speckled with sand and tyranny—his every movement, his every step, is an element of the past. All around him, smothering him, are soldiers of tomorrow—they are evolved, swifter, more disciplined warriors than Shu's stubborn, act-before-thinking mentality could ever equal.

But to understand Shu's position, you have to witness his peril firsthand. Before being throttled into a science fiction kingdom, he was a teenager living in suburban Japan. His only battle training was an after-school kengo course, which he was taking, for all intents and purposes, to impress a girl. Though, upon losing a practice match, he retreats to sulk atop a group of abandoned smoke towers (a favorite childhood hideout). There, without warning, time freezes—the wheels of every car instantly halt, each flag that waved in the wind turns eerily static. And through a portal in the sky, a small extraction team emerges—big mechs, robot dragons and all—to take a mysterious young lady, sitting on an opposite smokestack, back to the future. Shu gallantly fights to save the silent girl dubbed Lala-ru, yet fails, only to be rocketed into the time warp in the heat of frenzy.

What occurs from that moment forth becomes more hellish as the series progresses. Shu is thought to have a pendant torn from Lala-ru's neck, so he is rigorously tortured (beaten with sticks and hung in mid-air, a perfect feast for hungry vultures). It is King Hamdo, the unruly leader of the desertland (a villainous Paul Reubens-type—very sinister) who enacts the punishments, utterly determined to find the crystal before it falls into the enemy's grasp.

"Where the hell am I? This isn't Japan," Shu begs at the closure of the first episode. But such a question relates to more than just his confused state; *Now and Then*'s animation, too, offers up a unique, very cinematic approach to the medium. Nearly every shot is framed dynamically, using perspective to great advantage. Imagine an anime directed by Peter Jackson—set in a dry landscape, not Tolkien's Middle Earth—for a quick visual.

Coming volumes of this series, painting a desperate future of slavery and war-plagued continents, are sure to keep the drama flowing.

Saver it.

JON M GIBSON

play rating ●

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UTENA MOVIE

central park media • 87 mins

play rating ●●●●●

It's okay if *Revolutionary Girl Utena: The Movie* leave's you comatose, drooling on your corn nuts the first time you watch it—in fact, it's expected. Director Kunihiko Ikuhara himself asserts, "I don't want people to watch this movie with any prejudice." And for good reason—it's better to let *Utena* kind of wash over you, and not try to interpret it in the conventional manner. Not purposely, I think, Ikuhara has given the movie a David Lynch-style quality in dealing with the peculiar subject of a girl coming to terms with her sexuality and mortality, who, due to a childhood trauma, wants to be a prince but not necessarily a boy. Or perhaps the entire tale exists in her mind's eye.

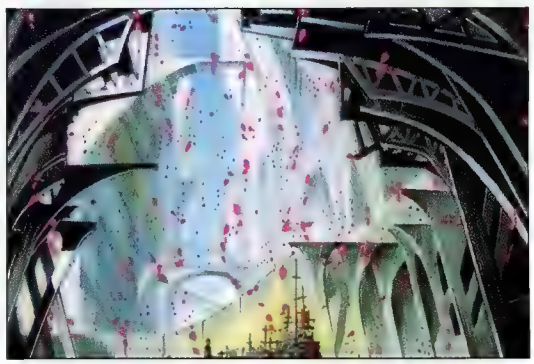
Shifting between a psychosis that encompasses a fictional reality, morose symbolism and flashbacks that would make Timothy Leary green with envy, this glimpse at the girl prince exists outside of the somewhat tangible TV episodes (which Software Sculptors have, to date, released about half). Yet it covers similar ground, but in an even more surreal fashion. Taking place once again at a posh Academy with a distinctly Parisian flare, built on bridges and catwalks, all the players (even a glimpse of Pupu) are assembled but seem even more narcissistic and sinister than before.

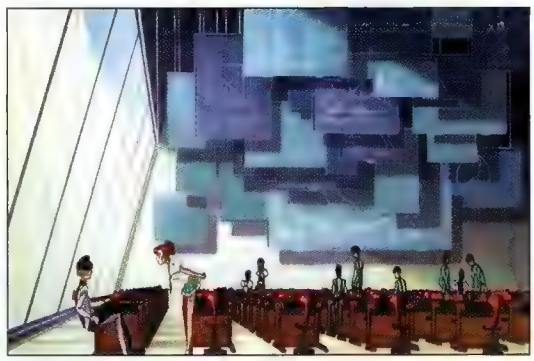
At its core, the story swirls around Utena's deceased lover, alive and well in her mind, and defending the honor of Anthy—the Rose Bride. A sumptuous girl alive in a sea of roses, she is both servant and plaything, awarded to the fencing champion of the Academy. Does Utena duel her classmates to save Anthy from humiliation or to fill the void in her own tragic life? Anthy signifies the ultimate honor, but comes at a price. When there's no line, how far will you go? To what extent can you allow yourself to indulge?

Any attempt at a story this complex and metaphysical using traditional artistry would fall flat on its face, and it is here that Shinya Hasegawa (key animation supervisor on *Evangelion*) achieves greatness. A classroom serves as a backdrop for a wall of floating, shuffling chalkboards; ornate bridges span as far as the eye can see; and everything seems to exist at great heights. It's as if the entire production took place in the sky.

In place of the TV show's peculiar and unsettling interludes, subtle references, rumor and innuendo are broadcasts in silhouette from two delicate, retro beauties from a campus radio station. Later, they cheer and commentate as Utena and Anthy make a break for freedom in a ride that defies description—this anime defies description. It's as elegant an animated feature that you will ever see.

DAVE HALVERSON





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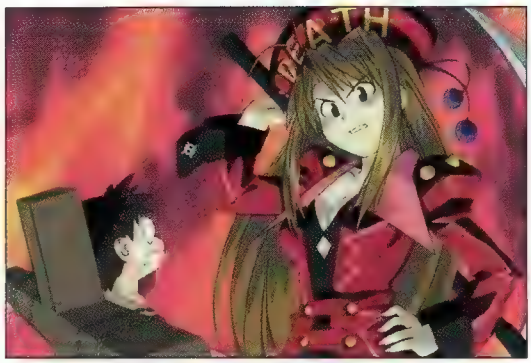
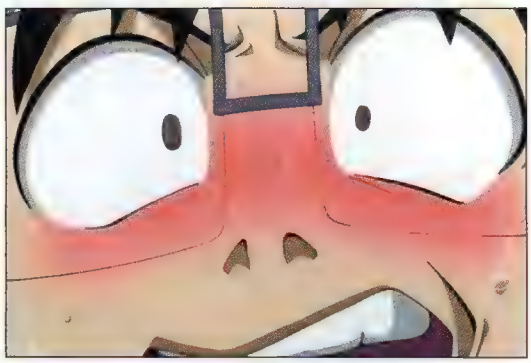
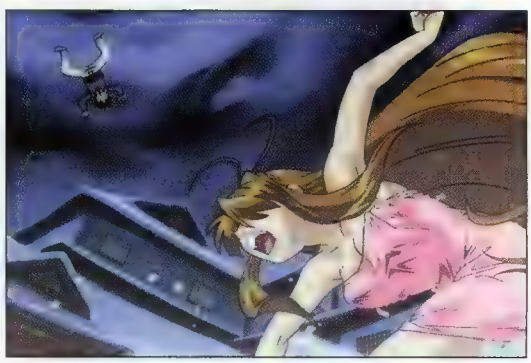
LOVE HINA

bandai entertainment • 100 mins

play rating ●●●●●







The world of *Love Hina* seems to be something ripped straight from the universe of *Tenchi Muyo*. Following the much used single-male-and-multiple-female formula, this series initially has a distinct air of unoriginality. But don't count it out simply because it relies on a much-used template.

Keitaro is a rather plain young man who dreams of attending the prestigious Tokyo University. He has based his lofty educational goal upon a promise made to his childhood sweetheart when they were forced apart. Unfortunately, for Keitaro, it seems he is simply not smart enough to pass the acceptance exams. Facing the very real possibility of becoming a failure, Keitaro is summoned by his grandmother to manage her girl's dormitory while she takes a vacation. While it may seem like absolute paradise for any young man to live with several beautiful girls, Keitaro discovers that dealing with that many females while simultaneously trying to study for exams can be unpleasant, to say the least.

The story and characters of *Love Hina*, while not immediately endearing, carry a depth that is not apparent until further into the series. What first looks to only be clone of the many "shoujo" anime that have come before, *Love Hina* eventually branches off to go its own way. The humor is a strange blend of common slapstick and outrageously weird situation comedy that only the Japanese can put together correctly. Most everything about this series—from the art and the music—is quite mediocre. Although the character designs are cuteness personified, there is nothing more to make them truly standout.

Love Hina does, however, contain three things that make it really worth watching. The first item is the plucky opening theme that will have you singing along by the second episode. Next, and most important, is the uncommonly deep character development. Every character goes through life-changing experiences that are reflected in their personalities as the story unfolds. And last—but not least—are the overall exuberance and plain old good feelings that radiate from every episode. Give *Love Hina* half a chance and it will find its way into your heart.

CHRISTINA ALEXANDER

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PLASTIC LITTLE

adv films • 50 mins

play rating ●●●○○

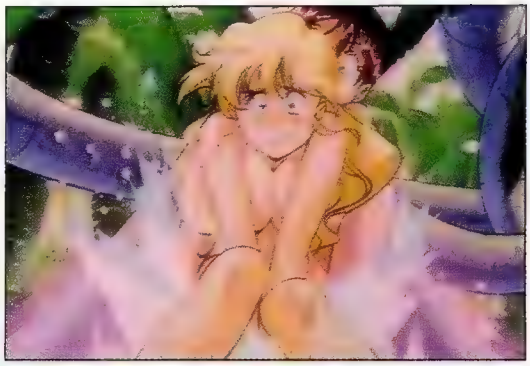
Plastic Little, one of ADV's countless hidden treasures (their VHS library is just begging to burst out: *Dragon Half*, *Ruin Explorers*, *Golden Boy*—the list goes on forever) is finally making it's way onto DVD. One of those rare titles that manages to combine graphic violence, gratuitous nudity, and touchy-feely camaraderie, it's a slice of anime joy that's not to be missed.

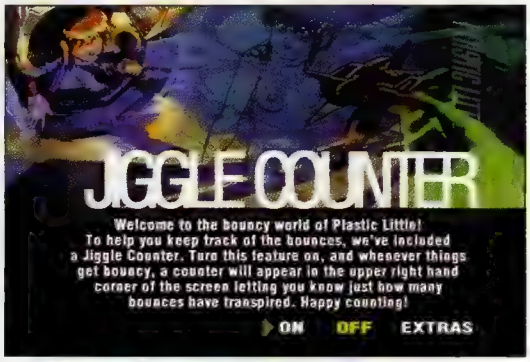
A seemingly young girl (with hidden assets you'll not soon forget), Elysse, witnesses first-hand her father's brutal murder at the hand of the Federation's merciless leader, VonTrap. A scientist working on the cities gravity belts, he was the last line of defense for the people of Yietta, a floating city surrounded by beautiful liquid gas oceans. The Federation has decided it's repo time on home sweet home, and everything must go—including the citizens. But first, they still have a little blonde mess to clean up named Elysse.

Before they can get to Elysse, they'll have to go through the crew of the Cha Cha Maru and their Captain, Tita—a tomboy with a love for bathing, a thirst for conflict, and one cool alarm clock. When Tita rescues Elysse from the clutches of the enemy, they bond in the bathtub (shouldn't everybody?) and an inseparable friendship is born. She and her crew will put it all on the line to foil the Federation.

If only it were that simple. People die and crucial characters bleed—this enemy is exceptionally ruthless. *Plastic Little* goes from playful girl-talk and bouncing boobs to mega-violence in the blink of an eye. Ain't it grand!? The character designs by Satoshi Urushihara are high-spirited and alive, and the vehicles and ships exhibit originality and imagination. Movic Co. and Sony Japan had a healthy animation budget too, making *Plastic Little* the complete package. Tita's almost too bubbly at times, and the script has a few overly corny moments, but this is a classic 16-and-up anime.

DAVE HALVERSON




JIGGLE COUNTER
Welcome to the bouncy world of Plastic Little!
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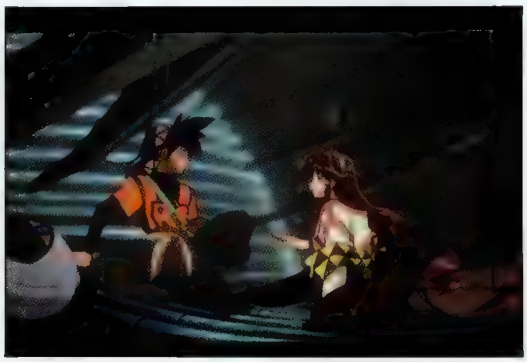
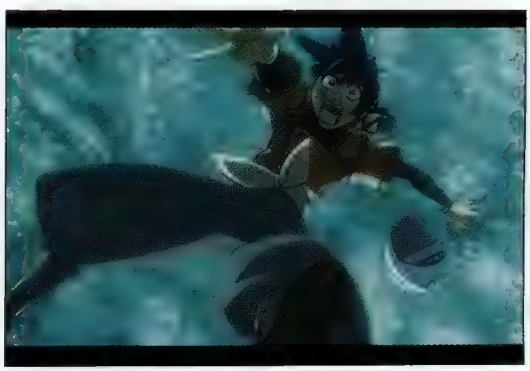
VANDREAD

pioneer entertainment • 100 mins

play rating ●●●●●





Now here's a scenario I just can't get behind: A couple hundred years before *Vandread* takes place, the Men of Earth build a great ship and leave Earth behind, setting off to colonize space. But they leave one fairly important thing behind: women. How and why, I have no idea. At least bring some hookers! Fast forward into the future where the *Vandread* saga begins, wherein third-generation males believe that women were a hulking race of Melbolgia-looking demons who enslaved men and, on occasion, ate their guts.

We find the Men on their home planet, Tarak, planning a major assault, their mother ship, The Ikazuchi, packed to the gills with Vanguard mech-fighters, their crowning achievement in defense technology. They're declaring an all-out war... on Women. Females have taken to the stars too, and they not only have their own planet, Mejale, but they're pirates and are preparing to kick some Man ass real soon. Oh yeah, they must have *The View* and *Martha Stewart* on DVD. But the Women get the jump and quickly invade The Ikazuchi's new extremity, causing the commander to jettison that half of the ship and fire upon it. Somehow, the missile fire blows it through some kind of a black hole and it ends up in a remote galaxy.

Now here's a scenario I can definitely get behind. On the ship are a whole squad of women—mostly cute, very sexy ones—and three men. One stowaway, Hibiki (our hero), a mysterious, sophisticated doctor, and one rich boy, sissy poser. Hibiki, in fact, wakes up after the blast with a little jiggly gift in his hand. Too bad he has no clue what to do with it. Talk about a concept. The Men think babies come from factories, while the rumor on the female side is that Men have some strange tube between their legs. This is going to be fun. Rich boy turns out to be the Women's male Melfina (it's a Man ship after all; they don't know how to drive it), while Hibiki, a lowlife third class grunt on Tarak, turns out to be an ace Vanguard pilot with the ability to combine with female vessels to form one indestructible mech fighter. Lucky for them, too, as they soon discover there's a force at work in the galaxy that wants to vaporize both races.

Vandread is put together much like *Blue Submarine No. 6*, mixing traditionally animated characters with CG crafts and mech fighters; fortunately, both are polished. The character designs have a unique, soft look with generous amounts of exaggerated expression, especially pertaining to Dita, who's the most fascinated with Hibiki's manliness. Butts and boobs are firm and round, eyes more farther apart then usual—almost alien looking. The costumes are superb. The CG—though no attempt is made to blend it with the animation—is clean, reflective, very artificial looking, like something from Mainframe (*ReBoot*). The end result is a new series that looks and sounds like the best thing since *Outlaw Star*. Something tells me we're in for one helluva ride.

DAVE HALVERSON

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MANGA

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SOUL HUNTER

adv films • 125 minutes

play rating ●●●●●

Peculiar is the first word that comes to mind when describing ADV's latest 12-and-up (I don't think so) saga, a surreal fable lacquered in black comedy that mixes a gamut of emotions in an oddly deadpan fashion. Striking a balance between sane and insane, *Soul Hunter* manages to entertain while it disturbs. Look! Death and dismay—let's have a party! The demons in this one definitely have the upper hand.

We find Shinkohyo (a scarily monotone clown-like demon that floats around the heavens on a big fat cat that goes by the name of Kokutenko), cat-paw remote in hand, flipping through the over a billion cosmic channels on the "1000 mile eye"—heaven's answer to HBO. He's looking for something "interesting," since it's his creed that "something interesting" is all we really long for.

He stops on the tragic events surrounding the human world where an evil queen (she's cute as heck, though), Dakki, has possessed the king of the Yin Dynasty and reduced him to a googly eyed zombie. As a result, his kingdom is crumbling: the people are dying of starvation, and disease is rampant. But Dakki doesn't care; she spends all of their taxes on "defense" and filling the palace ponds with Saki. She gets off on human suffering, and has a ton of fun doing it.

From on high, the Immortals decide it's time to act and end her reign by performing a sealing ritual, known as Houshin, on her and the deities that support her (kind of like the Taliban). But rather than risk a valuable warrior, priest, or scholar, the cucumber-headed high priest Genshitenson decides to send Earth their resident imbecile, Taikoubou, on a flying hippo, Sibuxiang, which looks like Rayman after a 10-year cake binge. Soon after departing, Taikoubou, being the poster child for lazy, decides that rather than attempt to strike down all 365 demons on the list, he will simply go after the big cheese, Dakki, and watch the rest fall like a house of cards. So Paopei in hand (a sort of magic wand that each deity possesses; his looks like a car antenna), he makes for the human world and an adventure quite unlike any (even in anime) you have seen before. Early on, a half-Paopei, half-human baby floats out of its mother's tummy, matures between episodes, and goes on a killing spree. Nuff said.

An interesting blend of techniques were used creating the look of *Soul Hunter*, including rotating backgrounds, simple texture maps, contrasting still layers, and a few cel shaded renders, but overall it's comprised of good TV-quality animation (by higher Japanese standards) with the emphasis placed wisely on the action. The character designs are all over the place, but excellent overall, especially in the costumes. You haven't lived until you've seen a talking stork with huge red-gloved hands and doughnut-sized black eyes, wearing red boots and bermuda shorts. The DVD's got some nice extras too, including historical backgrounds, voice-actor profiles, a glossary of terms, translator notes, and a relationship tree. You'll need it!

DAVE HALVERSON

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ASTRO BOY

manga entertainment • 100 mins

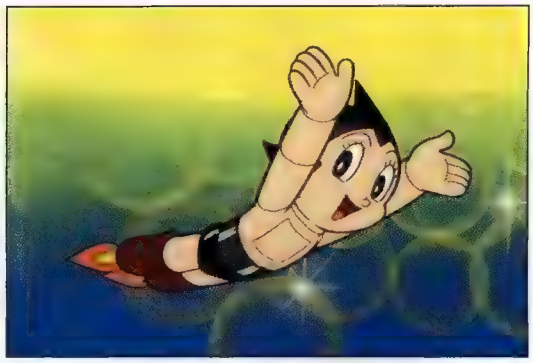
play rating ● ● ● ● ●

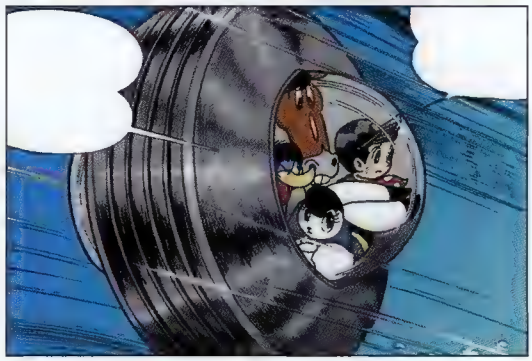
In the early eighties, Japan's wildly popular animated personality, Astroboy, returned to the small screen with all new color adventures. A U.S. release seemed natural, but Astroboy's new adventures were darker and moodier than its predecessor, and this spectacular anime never made it stateside. Even though Tezuka (God of Manga) himself wrote most of the initial stories, it was a commercial failure—most unfortunate, because the color series still retains the charm of the original show; it is a joy to see *Astroboy* in Technicolor. The visuals and animation are very simple yet effective and don't stray too far from the familiar designs we've come to love. This new series is certainly not a complete revamping, but more of a slight update of the original. It's been a painfully long wait: One of the most enduring icons in anime history finally gets a color update and a much-deserved U.S. release.

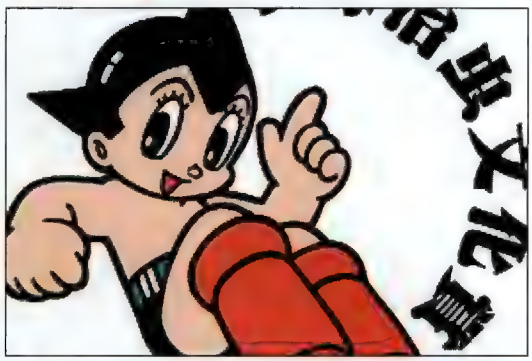
With rumors abounding of the new live-action CG movie of *Astroboy*, this new release from Manga comes at a good time. The first volume contains the first five episodes of the 52 episode series. The first episode goes straight into the creation of Astroboy, and for the most part remains the same with just a few subtle changes. In the near future, Toby is accidentally killed in a car accident. Professor Boyton, Toby's father, is distraught over his son's death and decides to create a robotic version of Toby. At first, everything seems perfect, but when Toby can't behave in front of high society, he's discarded as a failure and picked up by the evil Hamegg to work at his circus. The second story deals with Toby's hardships, working at the circus and his eventual escape to the Ministry of Science. This is the transition episode that transforms Toby from zero to hero. There's also more humor and it is here that we see the origins of his shiny red boots and his new name, Astroboy—Astro for short.

My favorite episode was the fourth, with its more serious tone and the way it delivers Astro a taste of love that ends on a sour note. Overall, I welcome Astroboy's return and want to see more of his color adventures. Astroboy is a hero for all ages who hasn't lost his luster one bit.

ENRIQUE GALVEZ







LABYRINTH OF FLAMES

central park media • 60 mins

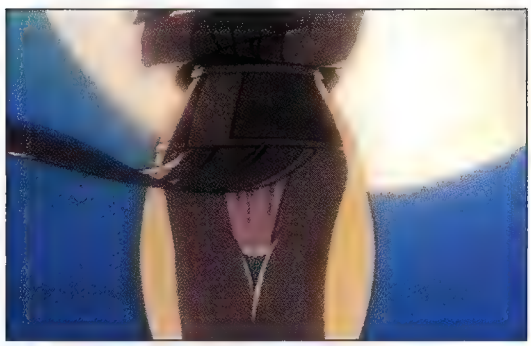
play rating ●●●●●

What's a wannabe samurai to do? Going from loser nobody to the fiance of a gorgeous, wealthy princess is no easy burden to bear. Especially when her horny (and hairy) father hates your guts, there's a stacked TV reporter (or is she?) filming your every move, her ex-boyfriend is trying to kill you—and everyone's panties are showing. Central Park Media's *Labyrinth of Flames*, from the acclaimed director of *Project A-Ko* and *Agent Aika*, Katsuhiko Nishjima, takes us on a hyper exaggerated rampage that encompasses some of the best animated comedy since *Photon*, along with twisted sexuality, buckets of gratuitous blood, and more panty shots than a Victoria's Secret catalog. *Labyrinth* is sheer guilty pleasure at its finest.

Galan, a kid with power in all the wrong places, plays the geek role to perfection (reminiscent of *Golden Boy)* and Princess Natsu truly could give a toss about anything but herself. She's a greedy, self-centered, spoiled—but fun-loving—scantily clad, little brat. It's a match made in heaven. The main source of comedy, however, comes from Kasumi, Mrs. Natsu's hand maiden. She wheels around an IV drip concocted of carefully formulated chemicals that turn her from a sex deprived butt kisser into a competent—but doped up—Ninja.

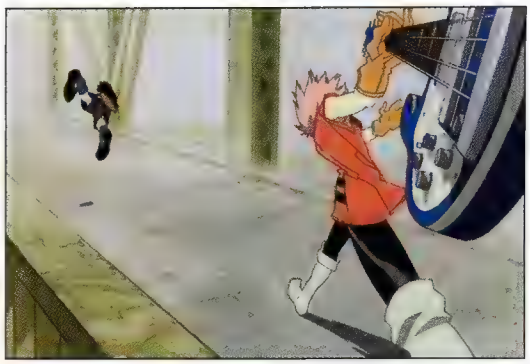
Watching this misguided pack of freaks save the Shogunate from a couple of thieves posing as daddy's "girlfriends" is as entertaining as a week of Richard Simmons spots on *Letterman*. You'll love the credits too, coming and going. *Labyrinth* is an unexpected comedy blast.

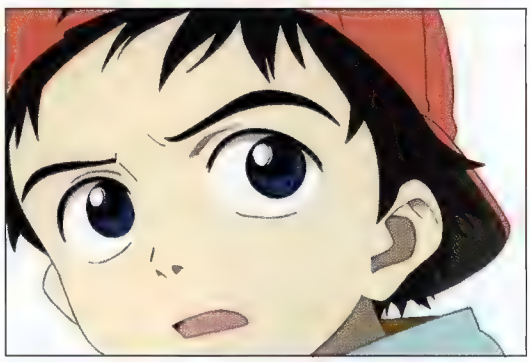
DAVE HALVERSON



FLCL

digital manga



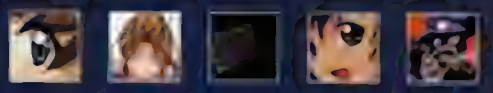


Whether you call it *Fooly Cooly*, *Furi Kuri* or *FLCL*, one thing is clear: Gainax' latest creation is a masterful six-episode anime befitting the company that brought us *Wings of Honneamise*, *Gunbuster* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. Just consider the bloodline: Working with Gainax, *Furi Kuri* was created and directed by Kazuya Tsurumaki (key animator for *Nadia*, *Secret of the Blue Water*, assistant director of *Evangelion* TV, and director of the *Evangelion* movie, *Air*) and produced by Production I.G (*Ghost in the Shell*, *Jin-Roh*, *Blood the Last Vampire*). Although I've seen only one episode—in its native Japanese tongue, no less—I can attest first hand that it is truly something special.

As stories go, this one looks and sounds much better than it will probably read, but here goes. The male lead, Naoto, may be 12, but he's dealing with some pretty grown-up issues. His father and grandfather are eccentric, immature perves—which by anime terms is practically standard issue—and his big brother—likely his only example of normalcy—has just gone off to play pro baseball in America, leaving behind a promiscuous 17-year-old girlfriend, Mamimi. She wastes no time snuggling up to Naoto, which, when you think about it, isn't so bad. What is bad, though, is the self-proclaimed alien on a scooter, Haruhara Haruko, who likes to smash Naoto on the head real hard with her bass guitar. Mamimi, meanwhile, turns out to be somewhat of a fruit loop: she has an odd fascination with *Fire Starter*, a videogame about fire; and a god named Cantide, who's about to give her a little shout out. From here, it's anyone's guess.

What makes *Furi Kuri* shine is the combination of Gainax's rich character designs, incorporated in such a playful style that's completely opposite of *Evangelion*. Blanketed in soaring production values, this is the best-looking six-episode series I've ever seen. Production I.G. gives *Furi Kuri* a look of quality you don't normally associate with abstract comedy and highly exaggerated characters, the combination of which is something to celebrate. Open your mind.

DAVE HALVERSON



Dirty Pair Flash vol.2

ADV FILMS • 12 & UP
123 MINS

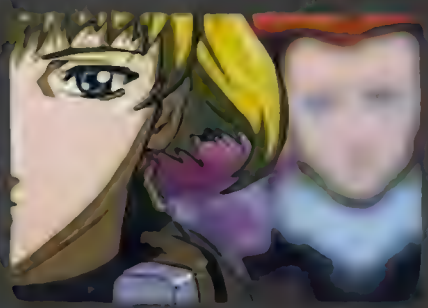
'Kei and Yuri bounce through a DVD filled with outrageous comedy and rampant demolititon'

play rating

Working for the covert JWA agency, Kei and Yuri continue to cause way more trouble than they solve (you have to wonder how they got through the screening process). For instance, on their latest case -- or caper -- which takes them off-world to the theme park planet Worlds World, they destroy the spaceport coming and going. Vacationers are stranded, hotels jammed, and the park, as a result, is under severe financial burden.

I like everything about these episodes, but especially the settings. The idea of dueling theme worlds is intriguing, and the way we're going, not so far fetched. Thigh-deep (and what nice thighs they are) in all the trouble they can handle Kei and Yuri eventually find themselves shacked up an all-girl boarding school. Yuri gets a taste of lesbian love; they keep almost getting Tohma killed; and, well, everything blows up in the process. **DH**

Blue Gender vol.2



FUNIMATION • 15 & UP
72 MINS

'Blue gender is developing nicely, with less bug hunt and more drama, as the characters grow'

play rating

Blue Gender is in the all familiar Hamilton stage, as the characters become more defined in their roles. The series hasn't lost its appeal – although the element of shock so evident in the first two episodes has faded considerably. The surprises are fewer; and the music, tense and industrial, has opted for a lower profile. After having been awake for quite some time, Yuji has now become familiar with his environment. Conflicts arise when he refuses to let a rogue faction of humans die at the mercy of the Blue – direct disobedience of Marlene's orders. Yuji, by the episode, becomes more sensitive; Marlene, in contrast, more merciless. Still alive and kicking, the show is just moving at a slower pace. But the bug hunt will likely resume soon enough so we'll enjoy the quite before the storm while the promising series goes through its incubation period. **JG**

Shadow Skill vol.2

MANGA ENTERTAINMENT •
15 & UP • 135 MINS

'Weird accents aside Shadow Skills is a stylish beat 'em up packed with action and team spirit'

play rating

With their distinctively acorn shaped heads, massive eyes, big hurt, and long thin extremities, the characters in Manga's Shadow Skill-available for the first time on DVD-resemble screaming right out of Gunstar Heroes (the king of 16 bit action games). Woven into a story about loyalty, camaraderie, and serious ass kicking, it has all the makings of an epic action anime. Just as we are huge fans and swish off the English dub.

How ancient warriors got lazy New York accents I will never know but I've never experienced anything quite as surreal. It's like seeing a dwarf driving a Hummer next to Shag in a Mini Cooper. Just, ugh. The story follows the exploits of Gau Ban and Ella Ragu (yes, like the sauce) a brother and sister team (by association rather than blood) who both possess the legendary Shadow Skill-a fighting style that allows them to literally cut through foes. Gau-a male most of his young life finds his voice through the skill after which he and Ella's relationship blossoms among a region besieged with power-hungry warlords and fierce demons. When they're not fighting gladiator-style in the arena they're trying to kill each other on the road. Traveling with Gau, and the flamboyant Ella-a female the highest order of warrior-are Fauru, a Sui Ranta sorceress, and Kyuo Ryo, the last descendant of a proud family of demon slayers. Together they overcome personal and demonic obstacles from evil siblings to invincible enemies. The art alone, although it changes quite a bit from ep1 to episode, is best during the final fight in episode 2) is reason enough to seek out this DVD, which also includes a photo gallery and character bios. Nothing Earth shattering here story wise, but as far out action goes, Shadow Skill delivers.

DAVE HALVERSON

spirited away

sen to chihiro no kamikakushi

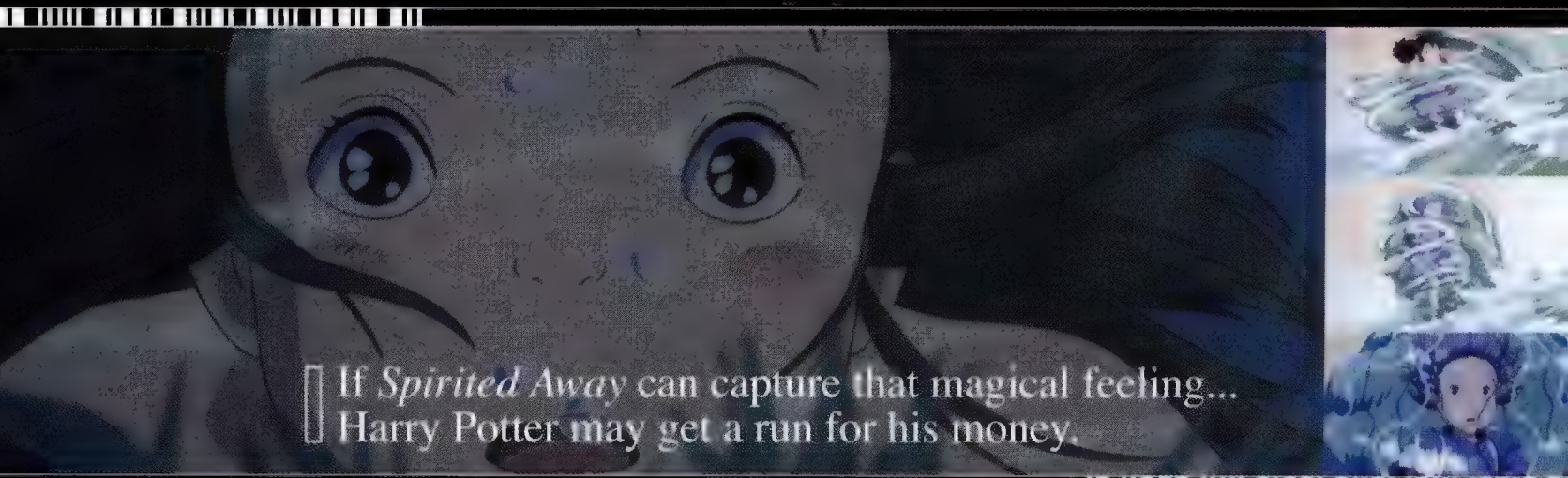
Through the tunnel, there was a town of wonder. *It was an inconceivable place,* where inconceivable things happened.

Hayao Miyazaki has moved millions with his beautiful animated works, including *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*, *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind*, *Porco Rosso*, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Princess Mononoke*. But as wonderful as all these films are, Miyazaki is still not a household name with the mainstream American movie-going audience; *Spirited Away* may finally change that. *Mononoke* should have, but a PG-13 edge and a limited release stifled its trek, even with Claire Danes, Billy Bob Thornton and Minnie Driver attached. *Spirited Away* is a beautiful story with something for everybody, and since Disney helped foot the 1.9 billion yen budget (about $15 million U.S.), a release here is eminent.

Set in modern day Japan, the protagonist, Chihiro, a dainty 10-year-old girl, is in the midst of moving to the suburbs with her parents when she wanders into a mysterious town. There she discovers the door to a world of gods and monsters ruled by a witch. In this world, humans are changed into animals... and then disappear. When her parents become victims of the spell, Chihiro is forced to work at a bathhouse for the gods and monsters to survive while she figures out how to lift the curse and return her family to the human world. However, to do so she must abandon her name and become a non-human herself.

Although the plot seems framed in the traditional good-vs-evil convention, Miyazaki takes a different direction, creating a journey of discovery in which Chihiro's spirit must guide her. It is by wisdom—rather than conflict—that Chihiro will find her way. The premise brings me back to my favorite childhood adventure, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, by C.S. Lewis, in which three siblings find a parallel world through a closet door. If *Spirited Away* can capture that magical feeling—and I know that it will—Harry Potter may get a run for his money. If Miyazaki wants to make us all feel warm and fuzzy. Bring tissue.

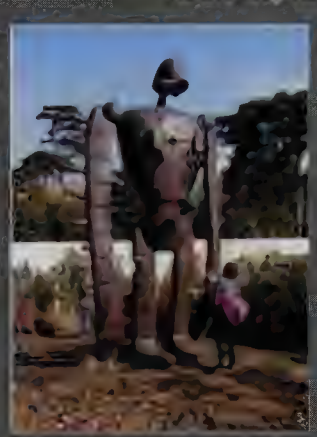
DAVE HALVERSON



The house of god

After dreaming many months of going to the Studio Ghibli Museum, I was finally lucky enough to nab tickets on-line via the Yahoo Japan Auction. Granted, this is not the normal way to get tickets, but obtaining one through proper channels has become extremely difficult. Miyazaki is the man here in Japan; Tickets for weekend visits are sold out thru March of 2002. And the only way to get them if they're available, is at a convenience store called Lawson Station (one of Japan's many 7-eleven-ish chain store). There are time constraints as well: the park opens at 10am every day, and is closed on Tuesday & holidays. In my case, my admission time was for 10am; if I was not in the museum by 10:25am, my ticket would have been voided! And then after a few hours out you go!

Fortunately, the park is well worth the effort. After a short shuttle bus ride from the train station, you get dropped off at the beautiful park. Another short walk into the park and you come to the front entrance and an array of multi colored buildings. The Museum was designed & created with the utmost attention to detail. One enters thru the beautifully stained glassed reception area; down the stairs to the main level where you come into another large lobby area; sort of a center court of sorts. You can see all 3 levels of the museum as you admire the beautifully designed architecture; the overall design is a mix of gothic & art deco with a large dose of the familiar Ghibli whimsy. One can see Mr. Miyazaki's office mock-up where you can see all the original backgrounds, cels, and roughs pinned on the walls! There are art rooms filled with beautiful cels with backgrounds & key setups from My Neighbor Totoro, Kiki's Delivery Service, Princess Mononoke-all of Miyazaki's works adorn the walls. And then there is the special exhibition of Studio Ghibli's newest film, Spirited Away. Original backgrounds & storyboards cover every inch of the exhibition. For the kids, there's a lifesize stuffed Catbus from Totoro, that they can crawl into, jump around in, and basically go nuts! On the rooftop is the awesome & gorgeous giant replica of the Robot Sentinel from Laputa, standing guard over the museum and the gift shop is stocked to the rafters with stuffed dolls, T-shirts, stationary & much much more. You can take a breather at the Ghibli Museum Café, dining in the restaurant or on the patio where you can gaze at the beautiful park that surrounds the museum.



The museum has announced plans to change the ticket purchasing system sometime in the spring of 2002, although no details have surfaced yet. So, if you're an anime fan planning a visit to Japan, the Ghibli Museum Tour is a must see.

And they don't take American Express

JAPAN WONDERFEST

Wonder Festival has been a mainstay convention in Japan for the past decade. Originally conceived as a garage kit convention, over the years it has become the biggest convention for buying antique & collectible toys, anime merchandise, garage kits, figures, and misc. collectibles from multiple genre's of Japanese and American entertainment. The show is sponsored & run by Kaiyodo, one of the largest garage kit manufacturers in Japan. They amass substantial industry buzz from their highly detailed & well articulated line of action figures including Trigun, Neon Genesis Evangelion, and Fist of the North Star, to name a few.

The show is held twice a year (once in the summer and once during winter) at the incredibly futuristic convention center; the Tokyo Big Site on Tokyo Bay, which resembles a structure straight out of Ultraman. It's a one-day show that boasts an attendance of over 50,000 people where attendees find one of the most incredible & original selection of goods ever assembled under one roof. Bring lots of cash if you go, because they don't Visa or American Express!

BeautifulGirls

A brief interlude with the man behind Video Girl Ai, Shadow Lady, and many more manga; Masakazu Katsura

The way you compose images on screen is very cinematic. Do you draw a lot of inspiration from live-action movies?

Its not as if I'm referencing it per se but I like movies a lot so I do think that it is influencing me to some extent.

You seem to strive for realism in your artwork. Why did you choose realistic animation over more cartoon-like anime?

Its because I like things that have realism. Especially because there are so many love stories out there, perhaps that is the reason.

Who is your biggest inspiration in anime? Are you inspired by any American artists or animators?

I like Alex Ross & Mike Mignola.

What are you working on for the future?

Many more super hero type of stories

Do you have any American comic character that you would want to draw or illustrate?

If I had the choice, I would like to illustrate Batman.

Are there any plans for any live action movies based on any of your manga characters?

No, not at this time.....However, I would like to see a theatrical movie made on Shadow Lady.

You were a guest at this year's Comic Con International in San Diego; what are thoughts on the show?

It was a very big show; there were hundreds of fans! Fans are same all over the world; they are a very important part of the industry.

What are your thoughts on the current state of manga & anime in Japan?

I don't know too much about the state of anime but from now on, as far as the state of the manga in Japan is concerned, there will be a lot of high quality titles coming out in the next year or so.

Shadow Lady resinated

The size: 25cm (including the base)
The weight: 226g (without the box)
The price: US$34.98
When: January 2002, available thru Diamond Dist.

play dates

january

Vampire Princess Miyu vol.3 • Tokyopop
$29.98 • 01.22.02

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Gasaraki vol.8 • ADV Films
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february

Adventure of Mini-Goddess vol.1 •
Pioneer
$29.98 • 02.12.02

Labyrinth of Flames vol.1 • US Manga
$29.99 • 02.12.02

Love Hina vol.1 • Bandai Entertainment
$29.98 • 02.19.02
$34.98 w/ Special Box

Gundam 0080 vol.2 • Bandai Entertainment
$24.98 • 02.19.02

Kurogane Communication vol.1 •
Media Blasters
$24.95 • 02.26.02

Rurouni Kenshin vol.15 • Anime Works
$29.95 • 02.26.02

Rurouni Kenshin vol.16 • Anime Works
$29.95 • 02.26.02

Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust •
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$29.95 • 02.28.02

march

Jin-Roh • Bandai Entertainment
$29.98 • 03.05.02
$59.98 w/ Special Box

Pilot Candidate • Bandai Entertainment
$24.95 • 03.05.02

Gatekeepers vol.4 • Pioneer Entertainment
$24.98 • 03.12.02

Gundam 0083 vol.2 •
Bandai Entertainment
$24.98 • 03.19.02

Knight Hunters vol.2 • Media Blasters
$29.95 • 03.26.02

Vampire Princess Miyu vol.4 • Tokyopop
$29.98 • 03.26.02

Saber Marionette R • Bandai Entertainment
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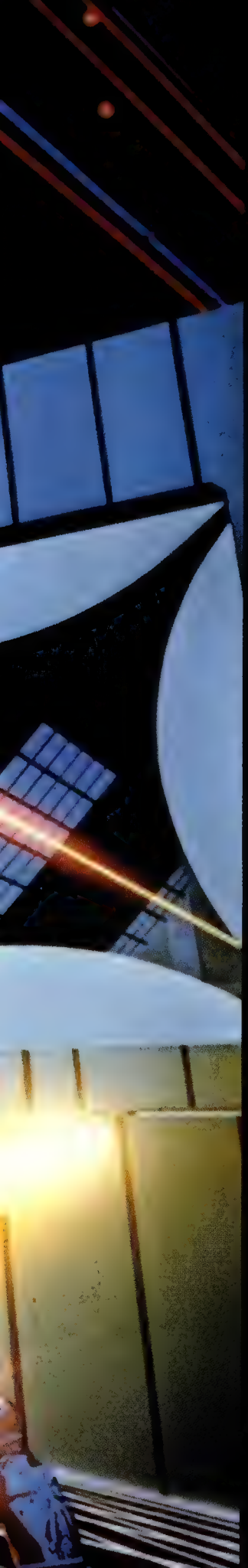
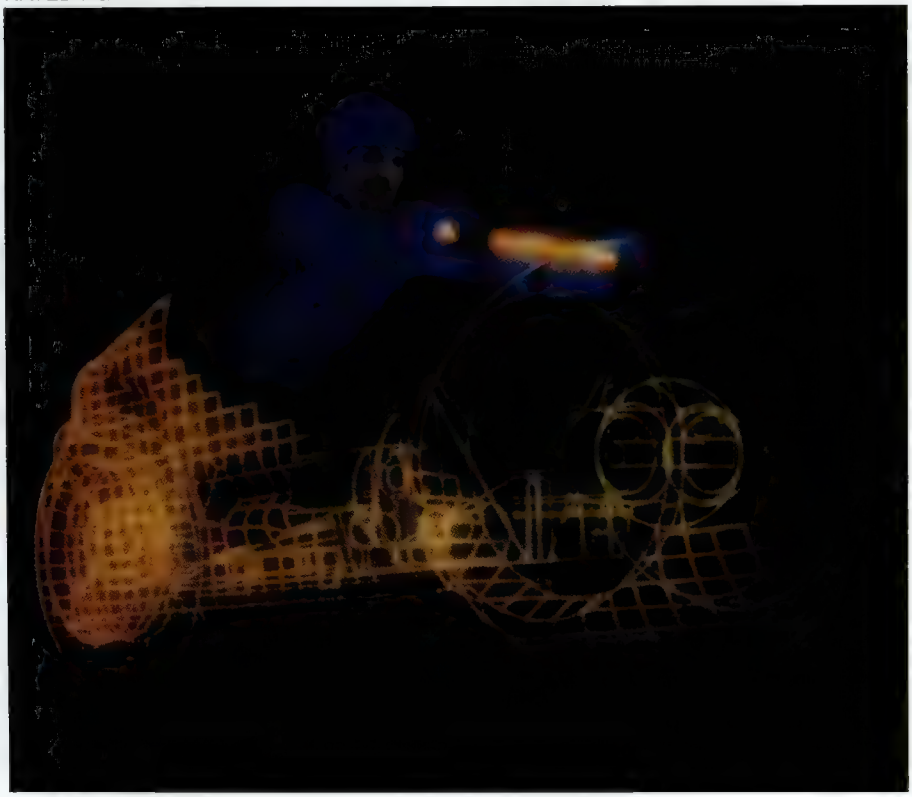


play MEDIA

TRON

BUENA VISTA
RATED PG



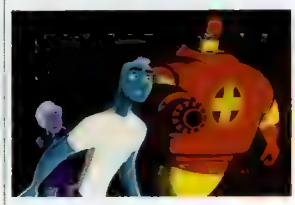
PLAY: *Tron* hardly looks or feels 20 years old. No one can argue that it was the first true videogame movie—a film that embraced both the artistry and the hobby of arcades. And Jeff Bridges, as Kevin Flynn, played the ultimate geek, a grown man who not only toyed with games for a living—a dedicated jockey of the coin-op—he played *in* them. Come on, it's been the dream of every gamer to be born into such a world—an electronic playground of lasers and light shows. Who wouldn't—if granted unlimited continues, of course—want to be transported inside the living, breathing universe of Crash Bandicoot or squash Goombas with Mario? Fortunately, the folks at Buena Vista decided to celebrate that dream with this 20th anniversary edition, completely remastered and retouched for the new millenium.

VALUE: Parking at the top of the list is an extraordinary 75-minute retrospective documentary, "The Making of Tron," which taps nearly all parties involved with the film for in-depth conversation. Writer/director Steven Lisberger, visual effects supervisors, producers, and key cast members are featured prominently. An audio commentary rolls in at a near second, with Lisberger (who admits he hasn't seen the film in about 10 years), producer Donald Kushner, and visual effects supervisors Harrison Ellenshaw and Richar Taylor chatting about the rigors of creating such a technically advanced movie (at least it was in 1982). About two more hours of miscellaneous extras round out this 2-disc set, including storyboards, the original soundtrack (initially deleted from the film), inspirational designs, and a few other small goodies. But probably the most rewarding aspect of this collection is the film itself. It's simply stunning how well *Tron* has aged—the visual effects, even in comparison to today's high-end tech, are still remarkably effective. Think about it: Would you have the inside of a microchip look any other way?

JON M GIBSON

MOVIE ●●●●●
DVD ●●●●●

OSMOSIS JONES



WARNER BROS
RATED PG

PLAY: Literally, *Osmosis Jones* is one tremendously fat pun. For 95 minutes, as the film morphs between live-action and animation, the play-on-words just keeps getting thicker. It's amazing, really, that the entire movie is focused on the body of one exceedingly disgusting man (Bill Murray)—known as the "City of Frank" by all the cells inhabiting him. An ingrown toenail is considered the ghetto, a perfect hideout for villain Thrax (played deviously well by Laurence Fishburne); and Frank's veins are used as a freeway system, allowing inner-body vessels to travel from head to foot with ease. It's unfortunate that *Jones* was one of the biggest flops of 2001—it deserves an audience.

VALUE: Although the Farrelly's voices aren't heard on the audio commentary, the animation directors, Piet Kroon and Tom Sito, offer great insight. The featurettes are nothing special, though. But this isn't a disc you buy for extras—buy it for the sheer pleasure of supporting underdog animation.

JON M GIBSON

MOVIE ●●●●○
DVD ●●●○○

MAD MAX: SE

MGM
RATED R

PLAY: The speed of *Mad Max* rivals that of even big budget movies today—it's fast—except this one was made in 1980 with a terribly small budget in a country not well known for action movies: Australia. But this "special edition" has one major advantage to all other copies of the movie: the original audio track, instead of the dubbed American version (studio execs felt Mel Gibson's natural tongue was too thick for audiences to discern). Plus, *Mad Max* put good ol' Mel on the map in the movie industry—for good reason. It's one of the coolest, most badass, fast action movies of all time.

VALUE: For what it's worth, MGM sure tried hard to piece together supplements for this re-release. A couple of reflective documentaries and poster galleries, along with a feature-length commentary are interesting... but there's just not a whole lot here. The extras ring of mediocrity. At least the studio made an effort, though.

PHIL HORNSHAW

MOVIE ●●●●○
DVD ●●●○○

GHOSTS OF MARS

UNIVERSAL
RATED R

PLAY: I've just watched potentially the worst sci-fi action film ever made. This mega flop actually makes JC's last two crap fests (the laughable *Ecsape from LA* and *Vampires*) smell rosey. The set, which amounts to about a hundred yards of cheesy concrete igloos, is made to support 90% of this we-need-to-kill-lots-of-Manson-refugees plot, in which some cheesy looking red fog makes a bunch of miners go into goth mode. Filed teeth and, ooohh, scraped faces! Look! Vile peircings and war paint... here they come... they're walking right at us! It's your typical 5 vs. 500 shootout where the seemingly powerful mutations, armed to the teeth, keep getting the shit kicked out of them by three chicks and a few inmates and cops. Oh and you always want to wear a floor length shiny vinyl trench coat to pick up a dangerous criminal. Poor Pam Grier; she must have owed on this one. Henstridge is a looker and Ice Cube dishes out the strong silent type convincingly enough, but, in the end, crap is crap and this is one big turd. What happened to the man that made in *The Mouth of Madness*?

VALUE: They don't help.

DAVE HALVERSON

MOVIE ●
DVD ●

TWIN PEAKS

ARTISAN
NOT RATED

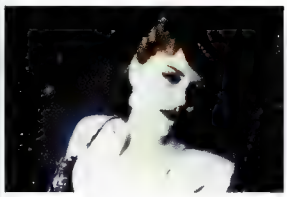
PLAY: DVD was invented for cult TV. So for fans of *Twin Peaks*, or even those just discovering the most darkly comic mystery to ever hit network airwaves (before HBO was big), this 4-disc set of the first season has been in waiting for quite some time. For the uninitiated, David Lynch constructed these early episodes around the murder of high school princess Laura Palmer—who killed her; was she an innocent victim? Kyle MacLachlan (seen earlier in Lynch's *Blue Velvet*) is at his prime as Agent Cooper, bent on closing Ms. Palmer's messy case file. It's *very* meditated film noir—the don't-blink-or-you'll-miss-something kind—but *Twin Peaks* is definitely worth the 336-minute effort.

VALUE: Archival footage from the official *Twin Peaks* rag mag, *Wrapped in Plastic*, and introductions to each episode by the series' returning character, Log Lady, are the foremost supplements. But detailed analyses from the cast and crew of each episode are noteworthy views, too.

JON M GIBSON

MOVIE ● ● ● ●
DVD ● ● ● ●

MOULIN ROUGE



20th CENTURY FOX
RATED PG-13

PLAY: *Moulin Rouge* explodes onto your screen, cameras flying, zooming in and out with blazing music and bursts of delightful color. This is a musical that's not just a movie; it's a sensory overload experience. I, for one, hate musicals—but the simple presentation of *Moulin Rouge*, its huge circus-like ambiance and its amazing, uplifting tone make it an incredible thing to behold. Take your time and just absorb it all; the lovey-dovey storyline and slightly show-tuney conversions of modern songs are almost secondary and inconsequential. The power is in the sensory blast.

VALUE: This package is literally full of tons of interesting interviews, comparisons, documentaries and extended scenes—not exactly a digitally-packaged Film 101, but definitely a powerful look into an already exceedingly stylish movie. The extras on the DVD just pile on more style—and the style of explaining the style—so in the end, such an abundance of supplements might be overkill, but they're a perfect showcase for where the film's entire $40 million budget went.

PHIL HORNSHAW

MOVIE ● ● ● ●
DVD ● ● ●

KISS OF THE DRAGON

20th CENTURY FOX
RATED R

PLAY: Bridget Fonda has never looked better than as her depiction of Jessica, a bleach-blonde prostitute with an attitude—but that doesn't keep *Kiss of the Dragon* from falling short. Jet Li, for one, is not a good actor—yet he certainly knows how to throw punches; he's probably the fastest human alive. Luckily, as a secret agent sent from China into the bleeding guts of Paris, Li isn't required to flex his acting chops too much. The plot still develops slowly, though, chugging along between each action sequence. And the final fight payoff doesn't even compare to Jet's overseas projects like *Once Upon a Time in China*. Luc Besson even had a hand in this one as producer/screenwriter. Oh well.

VALUE: The DVD, though, does manage to compensate considerably. A commentary by director Chris Nahon, Li and Fonda is particularly entertaining. Additionally, some choreography blips are added value.

JON M GIBSON

MOVIE ● ● ●
DVD ● ● ●

FAST AND THE FURIOUS

UNIVERSAL
RATED PG-13

PLAY: Hot Girls. Hot Cars. Hot, *fast* cars. It eventually had to be done: the movie that sets out to be a perpetual chase scene. If this was Rob Cohen's intention, he couldn't have done so in a more stellar fashion. He even threw in some plot for good measure. While the hordes of followers, the beauty of the cars and women, and the organization of the illegal street races are surely exaggerated, you'll hardly notice. Parallels can, of course, be made to *Gone in Sixty Seconds*, but *Fast and the Furious*' stab at the "guy flick" thing is much more entertaining. The acting certainly *isn't* unrivaled, but if you want to watch and let the cars do the thinking, this is a movie to own.

VALUE: "Racer X," an article about street racing that inspired the movie, is a nice addition to the special feature roster, as is the director's commentary *during* the deleted scenes, during which Cohen actually explains why they happened to be omitted.

NICK HURWITCH

MOVIE ● ● ●
DVD ● ● ●

BUFFY: SEASON 1

FOX
NOT RATED

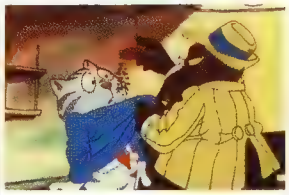
PLAY: Buffy, the reluctant vampire slayer, has taken many shapes. First, Kristy Swanson tried the wooden stake on for size in the original movie. Then Sarah Michelle Gellar took over the role for the WB series—a bit edgy and darker than the lighter, flighty silver screen version. Since, there's even been a musical episode. But it all began in March 1997 with "Welcome to Hellmouth," in which Buffy moved to Sunnydale after burning down the gymnasium at her former high school (mind you, it was full of blood-sucking vamps). Although it's difficult to propose that *Buffy* was/is the best thing on TV, it is certainly intriguing to watch the misadventures of Ms. Slayer unfold from the get-go.

VALUE: Gurus definitely deserve a bit more, like an audio commentary from creator Josh Weadon on all 12 episodes (not just one). But this three-disc set is a good initial helping of much more *Buffy* to come.

JON M GIBSON

MOVIE ● ● ●
DVD ● ● ●

FRITZ THE CAT



MGM
R

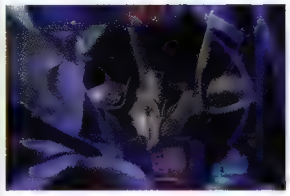
PLAY: Ahh, 1972—the year Ralph Bakshi announced he would change the face of animated features. And even though *Fritz the Cat* is probably his most careless piece of art, it's easy to see his roots poking through. To even have attempted the creation of this *very* adult, *very* offensive (well, at least at the time) cartoon—let alone, get funding from a major studio—is a noble achievement all its own. But *Fritz* is utter randomness, shuffled with hippie values like hatred toward "the man" and free love. Dream sequences, bathtub orgies, dynamite and beat poetry are all squeezed into this 80-minute ditty. Fritz is a likeable cat—hell, he spawned a sequel—but this animated caper comes off more as an experiment in crudeness than anything relatively coherent.

VALUE: The original theatrical trailer is all that collectors get. Though, Bakshi chatting about his beginning in the animation biz would have been welcome. Too bad.

JON M GIBSON

MOVIE ● ●
DVD ●

G-SAVIOUR



BANDAI
13 AND UP

PLAY: As with game franchises, live-action anime adaptations rarely work. But Bandai's surprising live-action Gundam flick, *G-Saviour*, comes close to bridging the gap. Combining the charm of a classic Japanese sci-fi production with the sophistication of a mid-level, modern-day American equivalent, it's a live-action movie that, unexpectedly, does right by a legendary animated franchise. Ex congressional pilot Mark Curran leads a cushy life, cultivating a compound to end the rampant famine on Earth. But when he stumbles on a conspiracy to suppress it, he breaks rank and joins a small rebellion attempting to reveal a sinister Congressional cabal. Borrowing a congressional transport from the local space port, they make for the Sides where Mark hooks up with up a big, beautiful CGI: G Saviour. We should all be so lucky. With the Colonies at their back, the rebel band sets out to take on the omnipotent Earth Congressional Force, and their rather shoddy propaganda machine. Granted, it's not the most original story, but pinned to the regal Gundam legacy, it plays out well.

VALUE: What, CGI Gundams aren't enough? A Japanese dub (there's a switch) is also included along with the English Dolby Digital 5.1.

DAVE HALVERSON

MOVIE ● ● ●
DVD ●

EVOLUTION

DREAMWORKS
RATED PG-13

PLAY: As you labor to watch *Evolution*, you can see Ivan Reitman digging deep to find that old *Ghostbusters* magic. But as good as they are in their respective rolls, Duchovny, Orlando Jones, and Seann William Scott are no Murray, Akroyd and Ramis. Three unlikely misfits trying to save the world from an unthinkable menace, the premise is almost a mirror image. You have the protagonist's unlikely love interest—a miscast Julianne Moore (I get the role reversal vibe, but she's just too far beyond this material)—the antagonistic asshole, and even a Mayor's ass for him to kiss (played by Akroyd), who in the end sides with the nitwits. All of this revolves around enough CGI and latex to fill a football stadium. Only instead of ghosts, we get odd (and very cleverly devised) mutations that end up being the most interesting characters in the film. And finally, the premise, which, even leaving ample room for plausibility, is just too far-fetched. Something tells me a potential planet-eating alien virus wouldn't be left in the hands of three stooges in a used fire truck full of dandruff shampoo.

VALUE: Brief conversations with the crew and deleted scenes (clipped for good reason) hardly justify the effort.

DAVE HALVERSON

MOVIE ● ●
DVD ● ●

PLANET OF THE APES

20th CENTURY FOX
NOT RATED

PLAY: As far as TV shows go, you could do worse. *Planet of the Apes* was a great idea for a movie, but not a TV show. Having been filmed in 1976, though, doesn't help either—half the time you can see the latex glue holding Dr. Zaius' chin on. Beyond that, every single episode has one underlying theme: equality. The original film, along with Tim Burton's remake, touched on that "living in harmony" concept nicely. But try sitting through 14 hours of that very subject. It's not really bad; it's just not very good, either.

VALUE: Since there really aren't any special features (despite the use of four discs), this package is solely based on the quality of the show—or lack thereof. During its premiere, *Apes* was in the minds of all Americans; it was an event (the same reason *Clueless*, *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Stargate: SG-1* spawned their own TV spin-offs). A tasty birthday present for nerds big on strange nostalgia. Otherwise, the novelty of cheesy make-up effects wears thin *really* quickly.

PHIL HORNSHAW

MOVIE ● ●
DVD ●

THIS JUST IN

***Jeepers Creepers'* star Justin Long expounds on the horror of everyday life—among other things ordinary**

as told to **jon m gibson**

***Jeepers Creepers* is an odd bird. Sitting down with it takes a brave soul—not because it's a surprisingly effective horror film, but because, at first glance, it appears to be just another teen slasher flick. But once you let Jeepers dig under your skin, there is plenty of evidence that sets it apart from that adolescent drudge: witty dialogue, a tense, suspense-packed plot; a production credit from Francis Ford Coppola; and a demon—the film's relentless villain—that is actually grotesque. Most of all, it's escapism, pure and simple. So we sat down with Justin Long, a bloody victim in *Jeepers* and co-star of NBC's neurotic dramedy, *Ed*, to discuss real-life scares. Randomness, in all its glory, follows.**

So, what scares you?
Interviews. [laughs] Like everyone else, death scares me. I think about death way too often. That's why I think a movie like *Final Destination* actually worked, in my opinion. It wasn't great, but the whole idea of death coming when your time is up—fate and all that.

Ex-girlfriends, maybe?
European sitcoms. Clowns are pretty scary. Weird animated characters like Mr. Clean. I find [that] strange things tend can scare me—and strange things tend to excite me. Bloated, pasty, obnoxious tourists are scary. People who like to get into fights are scary. Dudes with white hats, because I can't roll with that—I can't compete with that—and I'm probably gonna be one of the guys that they're beating up. And you can't reason with them. People who you can't reason with; I think that's scary. Drunk people who are just belligerent. The list goes on.

There are a couple of newscasters in LA that are a little frightening.
When I was little, I used to be terrified of Sam the Eagle [from *The Muppet Show*]. I'd have to leave the room when he came on. I guess he was modeled after Sam Donnelson—now I'm kinda afraid of Sam Donnelson.

When I was a wee lad, I used to scream when I saw Papa Smurf at Hershey Park.
The guys in the suit had a permanent grin. Then there was this eerie, high-pitched voice [that came] from inside. I remember, a few years after, I was old enough to realize what was going on—that there was a guy in the suit. I was embarrassed for being so afraid. But now I look back—that shit's freaky. To do that to kids—that's warped. Clowns are f'd up. There're these gitty old men with white faces, big lips and afros, honking horns in your face and riding around on little tricycles. Victor, [the director of] *Jeepers Creepers*—his first movie was called *Clownhouse*. It was one of the scariest movies I've ever seen. We *are* talking about horror movies, right?

Yep.
Scariest thing ever: If you ever go to the Santa Monica Promenade, there's a clown. She's short. She's got the body of Danny DeVito in *Batman Returns*. And she rhymes everything. But she only rhymes it with eh. Like, "Hey hey, what do ya seh? I will make a balloon for you to-deh." And she does it this whimsical, really frightening tone. And some of the kids started crying. I used to go there with my friend and we used to watch her in horror. She makes balloon animals for kids—but she charges the parents for them. So she has a little rhyme: "Hello, how are you to-deh? Would you like a balloon, I seh? Now, Mommy and Daddy be-wa-air, the charge for the balloon is 10 doll-airs?" Then, you'll try and talk seriously to her, like, 'How long have you been doing this?' She'll rhyme at first, but then she'll realize she can't keep up the rhyming stuff, so she'll just break out of character: "Ah gawd, I've been doing this for 10 years—I'm sick of it, these little bastards." **play**

SYNTHETIC PALACE

Stan Winston—a name synonymous with special effects like McDonald's is with cholesterol—takes PLAY on a tour of his mighty storehouse of Hollywood monsters

He is an actor—but not the usual fare. His powerful, snapping jaw can tear through a semi truck as if it were a wet paper bag; his stance, an awe-inspiring 20-feet tall and 40-feet long, towers over De Niro and Brando without question. But the most surprising fact: he's not even real.

"If you give an actor something to react to, you will get a performance. Let a great actor play off another great actor and you get great performances," Stan Winston says, referring to his *Jurassic* creation, a full-sized, animatronic Tyrannosaurus Rex—a synthetic being that twists, steps, bends and roars just like every other organic creature on the planet. "That's also the reason why fully computer-generated actors will never become a reality. We want to see Al Pacino act, not some animation."

Winston should know—he ventured into the glamour of Hollywood at a young age to become an actor himself. Instead, he now creates thespians from scratch at Stan Winston Studios in Van Nuys, California, a massive warehouse of advanced electronics, vats of latex and 24-hour technicians.

"In many scenes in the Jurassic Park movies, when you see actors appear really scared, you can be sure that they *are* scared. When the raptor was exploring Tea Leoni in *Jurassic Park 3*—blowing her hair, pushing her head around—she was really scared, because that thing can hurt her."

But reading a description on this glossy page doesn't offer Winston's creations justice. Once his dino engineers flip the power switch "on," a seemingly static raptor—almost statuesque—rockets to life. It begins sniffing Winton's grey shirt. It stares deep into his pupils, blinking occasionally, but is ultimately undistracted by the crowd of journalists admiring the giant lizard/human couple. The raptor even lunges for Winton's empty coffee cup, taking it in his mouth, crushing it with a mouthful of razor-sharp teeth. But the moment that the raptor tilted its head towards me, a lone editor taking notes and snapping photos, was the moment that I believed: Dinosaurs still roam the Earth—there was one staring directly at me, stalking me with its eyes.

"In the past, the best artists were working for the church, painting cathedral ceilings or sculpting busts. Today they work in movies," the grandfather of *the* Alien, *the* Terminator and *the* Predator retorts. If his endless storehouse of artificial creatures is any evidence—a lifelike Geoffrey, complete with a working voice chip, commissioned by Toys R Us for a series of commercials; a king croc from *Lake Placid* mounted high on the ceiling in one section of his massive workshop—more than just the best artists are working with Winston; they are the greatest (Michaelangelo never sculpted a walking, talking David, did he?).

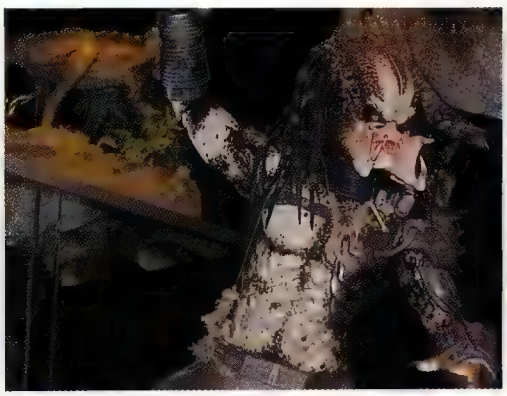
Most moviegoers underestimate the power of mechanics. "Are you aware that there is not a single frame of gorilla in that movie?" Winston quizzes, referencing *Instinct*, the film he is most proud of. Not one ounce of CG imagery crept onto the silver screen when his robotic gorillas were on camera—an impressive feat, to say the least.

"I am in awe every time I walk into this room, just as you are now," the Creature King smiles, admiring the 3D resume of work hung at all angles throughout the Winston Studios' conference room.

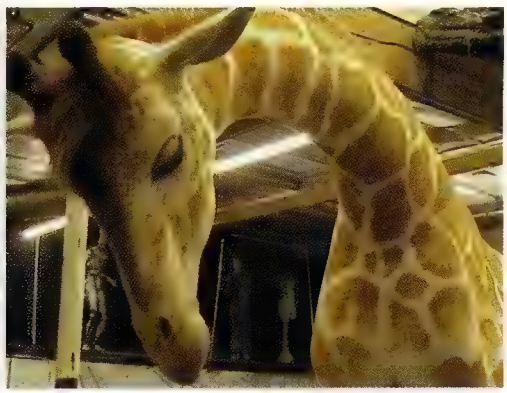
But the innovator isn't clocking out yet. After piecing together Teddy for Steven Spielberg's *A.I.*, Wintson entertained a phone call from MIT, the worldwide leader in the development of *real* artificial intelligence. The two robot factories are now sharing secrets.

JON M GIBSON

An animatronic raptor, aged from the original *JP*, eyes a crowd of meaty journalists



A one-of-a-kind prop from *Predator* is now a centerpiece in Winston's conference room



Geofrey, modeled with frightening realism, slept in the workshop before filming Toys R Us ads

A MATTER OF INTEGRITAH

TREY AND MATT STRADDLE THE LINE

South Park is one of the few shows to deal with current events without an agenda, and it was only a matter of time before the show's creators took a crack at the tragedy and aftermath surrounding the events of September 11, when a man that lives in a cave decided to take out his aggression on the citizens of the United States of America. The sooner they stick his head on a pole, the better.

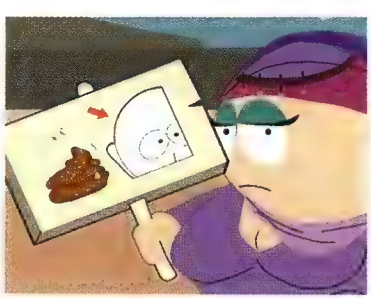
In the meantime, as a huge fan of *South Park*, I was concerned. How would Trey and Matt walk that fine line between political satire—as seen through the eyes of Cartman, Kile, Stan and Kenny—and ridicule, pertaining to the worst day in U.S. history? Because, let's face it, the words "tread lightly" do not appear in their contract. As I cannot imagine a world without *South Park*—the polar opposite of the mind-numbing crap that makes up 90% of network TV—I squeezed my Timmy doll with anticipation (to which he delicately exclaimed, "*Ti-mahhh*") as TiVo blipped over to Comedy Central.

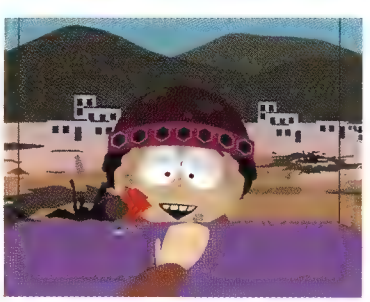
Whether or not you watch *South Park*, or even like *South Park*, when *Osama Bin Laden Has Farty Pants* hits DVD (or you can catch a rerun after the new season's out), you have got to check it out. Finding a way to get Cartman and Bin Laden together is one thing, but what follows will surprise even the most avid connoisseur, or disapproving Rosie O'Donnell-loving, Sally Struthers' cook-book-owning naysayer.

It's a wonder how Trey and Matt continue to keep *South Park* fresh, hilarious and, most of all, socially relevant. They followed up with shows on missing children and stem-cell research (in which they actually killed Kenny and made us care). No, seriously dude, I think Kenny is really dead. Anyway, I learned more about stem cells than I did watching *Dateline*. We *need* another movie.

Osama Bin Laden Has Farty Pants manages to be informative, patriotic, and hilarious, all at once, characteristics few shows can muster a single one of. You may never listen to Fleetwood Mac the same way again, but everything has its price. I hope there's room in the time capsule.

DAVE HALVERSON





ANIMATED JUSTICE

Cartoon Network tries on a golden lasso, a red cape and bat ears—and more—all in the name of protecting a little planet called Earth

as told to **jon m gibson**

Animation has always been the perfect platform for super powers. Unlike live-action, the special effects are all drawn by hand—thus, they meld much better. (Just take one glance at Christopher Reeve attempting to fly in Superman against a '70s blue-screen—'nuff said). So when Cartoon Network announced their plans for weekly *Justice League* romps, comic book fans rejoiced. Like *Batman: The Animated Series* and *Batman Beyond*, the series' overall style is slick, concentrating on heavy outlines and solid colors. Plus, instead of just Gotham City, each episode tosses the team into *very* exotic locals (space stations, the moon, deep under the sea, Mars). So to suppress our curious minds, Rich Fogel, Writer/Producer of *Justice League*, joined us for a colorful Q&A about tight tights and that other superhero show.

First, let's delve into controversy. Some folks have tiffs about your character choices for the show: Hawkgirl instead of Hawkman; the John Stewart incarnation of Green Lantern. Were there are lot of arguments?
RF: No, the producers (Bruce Timm, James Tucker, Glen Murakami and I) all got on the same page very quickly. While we're very hooked into the history of the Justice League, our main concern was building a solid group dynamic where every member had a distinct role and voice. We didn't want a bunch of bland heroes standing around with their hands on their hips. We felt that both John Stewart and Hawkgirl would add a needed spice to the mix. Besides, with Bruce's redesigns, they both looked really cool!

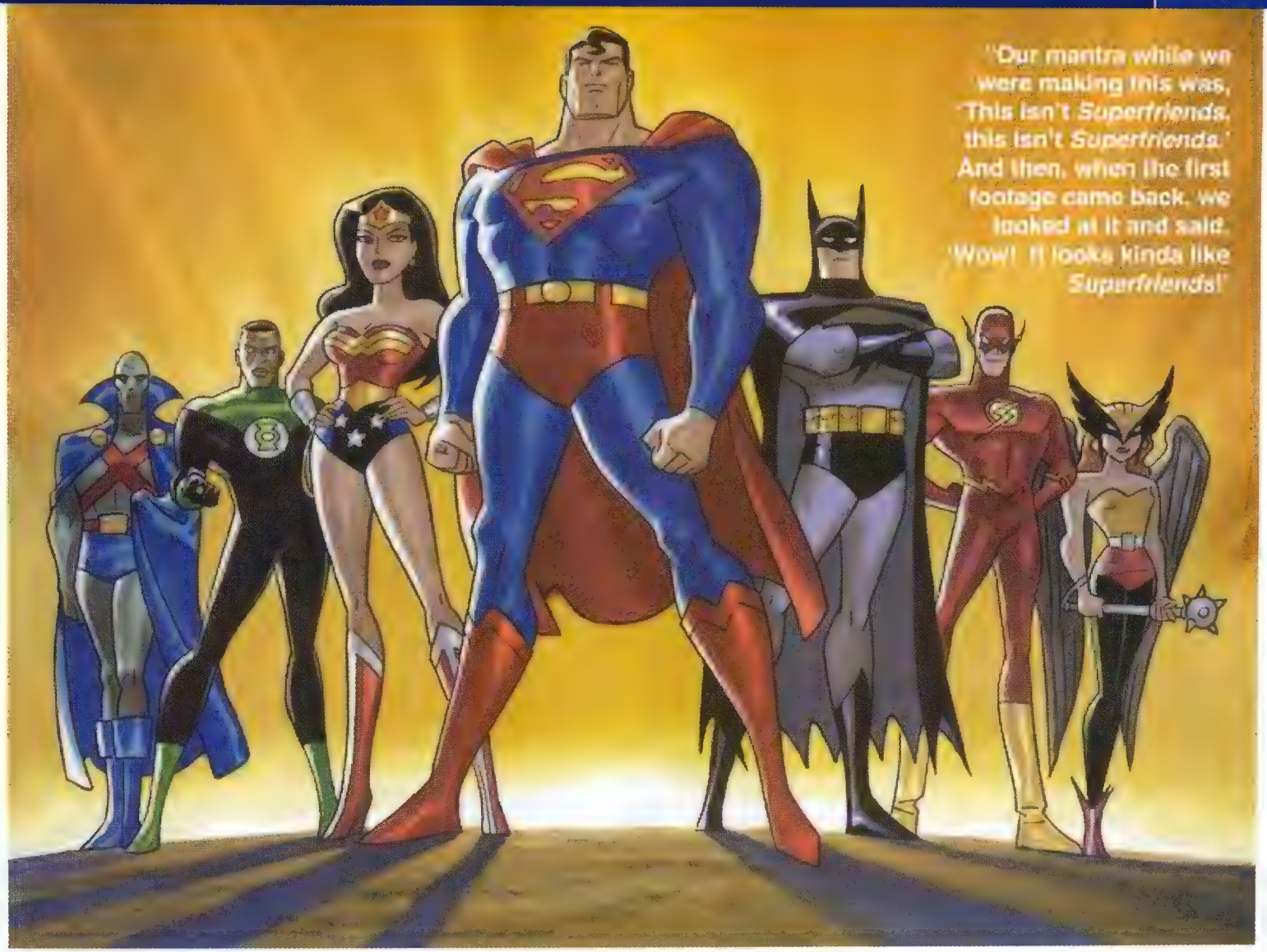
But there are also plenty of former JLA members that didn't make the cut. Who got dropped?
RF: The one that we've gotten the most flack about leaving out is Aquaman. Again, it was a question of what role he would play in the group. Rather than trying to shoehorn him in, we decided to do a special story arc that centered around him. We felt this was the best way to honor the character. And, so far, the Aquaman story has been one of our favorite episodes. However, we have no regrets about not including him in the line-up.

That's good, because there would have been a lot of regrets since there are so many superheroes in the comic book world. So were hour-long sessions ever considered instead of 30-minute installments—just to fit more characters into the mix?
RF: Early on, we realized that we couldn't tell good stories with this many characters in just half an hour. The stories all had to be big enough and epic enough to justify bringing in so many powerful heroes. Cartoon Network agreed to let us have all of the stories be two or three parters, which are then split up into half-hour segments. So, essentially, we are writing hour or hour-and-a-half shows. I've literally heard people scream when the 'To be continued…' card flashes on the screen.

Who are you targeting with *Justice League*? *Batman: The Animated Series* was a tad dark, appealing to an older audience; and *Batman Beyond* skewed younger. *Justice League* seems to fit right in the middle.
RF: It sounds corny, but we're targeting the kid inside all of us. The show is probably too intense for very young viewers, but we've tried to layer it so there's something for anyone who loves good stories, strong characters and big action. We've always believed there could be a larger audience for our shows, and that many potential viewers were still asleep when *Batman Beyond* came on Saturday morning. Now, Cartoon Network has given us a chance to test that theory.

Was there ever any thought put into modernizing the characters, giving them more cutting edge costumes? I hear rainbow-colored spandex is in season.
RF: These characters are icons, and we didn't want to mess with that. We felt if we could make the personalities strong enough, viewers would buy into the fantasy of the costumes. I think Cartoon Network's promo campaign did an excellent job of building excitement based on the characters' recognizable iconic logos. Fans are already arguing about who's hotter—Hawkgirl or Wonder Woman.

Wonder Woman, golden lasso—definitely. So on that note, there is also much more humor than the other DC-based series. What brought on the lighter tones?
RF: As you pointed out, there is something essentially silly about a bunch of heroes in colorful costumes hanging out together. Although we deal with


"Our mantra while we were making this was, 'This isn't *Superfriends*, this isn't *Superfriends*.' And then, when the first footage came back, we looked at it and said, 'Wow! It looks kinda like *Superfriends*!'

serious life and death issues, we felt *Justice League* also should be heroic and uplifting. These shows should be rousing fun—just like reading a good comic book. To take them too seriously would be a big mistake.

In fact, each hero is very young, too. Was it always the goal to preserve the team as they were early in their crime-fighting careers? Any chance we'll see a geriatric Flash?
RF: We went back to the earliest versions of these characters to see what made people excited about them in the first place. We had the luxury of not being tied to the comic book continuity, so we were able to pick and choose what we liked about the characters. Superman and Batman are actually older than they were in their own series. But Flash and Wonder Woman are younger than in the comics. Again, we were looking for a good mix. By giving Wonder Woman some disadvantages, such as inexperience in Man's world and serious Mother issues, we were hoping to make her more human.

I'd hate to see her on PMS. But emotional issues aside, isn't it difficult to keep all those superpowers in check?
RF: We've had to power them down, somewhat. In the comic books, J'onn J'onzz is as strong as Superman, plus he has tons of other powers. We scaled that back, because our basic premise is nobody trumps Superman. There's an unfortunate temptation in these stories to try to top yourself each time out. If you're not careful, pretty soon you'll have a bunch of characters who can toss planets around. And how do you tell compelling stories about that? What makes them heroic is the struggle. They have to strive and sacrifice to achieve victory.

Now, the inevitable question: Can you defend yourself against *Superfriends* comparisons?
RF: Our mantra while we were making this was, "This isn't *Superfriends*, this isn't *Superfriends*." And then, when the first footage came back, we looked at it and said, "Wow! It looks kinda like *Superfriends*!" But somehow, it felt way cooler. Because of network restrictions in the '70s and '80s, *Superfriends* was very limited in what [the show was] allowed to do—no hitting, no punching, no peril. In *Justice League*, we really put our heroes through the wringer. By the end of each episode, they've really been through something—and have the bruises to prove it. We recognize that most of our viewers are only familiar with these characters through *Superfriends*, but hopefully they'll learn to love our take on them, as well.

Any chance the Wonder Twins will make a cameo?
RF: If you look very carefully, they just might show up.

Finally, I've been pondering this for a while. Why does the JLA need anybody else when they have Superman? Can't he do everything?
RF: The pilot, *Secret Origins*, addresses that very issue. Superman thought he could do everything, but when he tried to take on too much by himself, he put the world in danger. The biggest challenge in putting these shows together is coming up with threats that are big enough to justify bringing these guys together every week. **play**

play contests

The Vampire Hunter D giveaway

Vampire Hunter D goods

Vampire Hunter D statue

Grand prize
D Statue from Koto Inc., phone strap, keychain, postcard set, T-shirt, theatrical poster and a year of PLAY magazine

3 runners up
The D Phone strap, keyachain, T-shirt, theatrical poster and a year of PLAY magazine

Poster and T-Shirt courtesy Urban Vision Ent., Statue retail 149.99 courtesy Koto Inc./ArtFx sculpted by Kenji Ando based on the Bloodlust movie (available this March call 1-888-COMIC BOOK for a dealer near you or go to http://csls.diamondcomics.com Postcard, cel phone strap, keychain imported from Japan courtesy of the LA Branch of Japan's largest anime store, Animate, located at 7314 Melrose Ave or on the web at www.animate-world.com

Martian Successor Nadesico giveaway

Ruri Hoshino statue

Ruri Hoshino Pencil Boards

Grand prize
This beautiful Nadesico statue and a year of PLAY magazine.

3 runners up
The Nadesico 3 piece pencil board set and a year of PLAY magazine.

Thanks to Koto/ArtFx for the statue (retail value 69.99, see preorder and web info. above for ordering) and Animate (see info. above) for the Pencil board sets

Video Girl Ai giveaway

Ai Amano statue

Video Girl Ai Graphic Novels

Grand prize
Video Girl AI statue from Koto Inc., the 6 episode Ai DVD from Viz, and a free year of PLAY

1 runner up
The Video Girl Ai Manga (volumes 1-4) and the Video Girl Ai 6-episode DVD both from Viz

Thanks to Koto Inc./ArtFx for the Ai statue (119.99 retail value, see preorder and web info. above for ordering) and to Viz for the DVD and Manga. Check out the J-Pop mall at http://www.j-pop.com/

Enter online to win one of our many contests and giveaways at
www.PLAY-magazine.com

POCKET ROCKETS

In my continuing pursuit of ways you can affordably ride your way to happiness (because riding stuff, next to games, is the ultimate expression of freedom), here's yet another way to take the edge off on two wheels–Pocket Racers! We used to ride these things around in the pits, and now they've become a little known sensation. Although there are a few different brands, Polini makes the ultimate in not only road racer but motocross models. For all the info. regarding these and other models (starting as low as $1699.99) go to www.polini.com or dial up your favorite search engine under pocket racers. You haven't lived until you've done 50 mph six inches off the ground.

DAVE HALVERSON

POLINI
WWW.POLINI.COM

NASCAR PRO VICTORY WHEEL

With two NASCAR games already available for the Xbox, Thrustmaster's NASCAR Pro Victory Wheel should prove to be quite popular. It's a large device, and robustly built, with a nice big set of pedals and a clever mounting system: you can either clamp it to a table edge or use the included curved arms to keep it held to your lap. Both methods work well, and while I didn't try the wheel with any NASCAR games (not a fan), I did try it with Project Gotham and Formula 1, and the wheel did its job. Naturally, it can't compare with Logitech's awesome force feedback device for PS2, but this is a solid wheel for the Xbox.

PETER GARDEN

THRUSTMASTER
WWW.THRUSTMASTER.COM
$60

FINAL FANTASY X T-SHIRTS

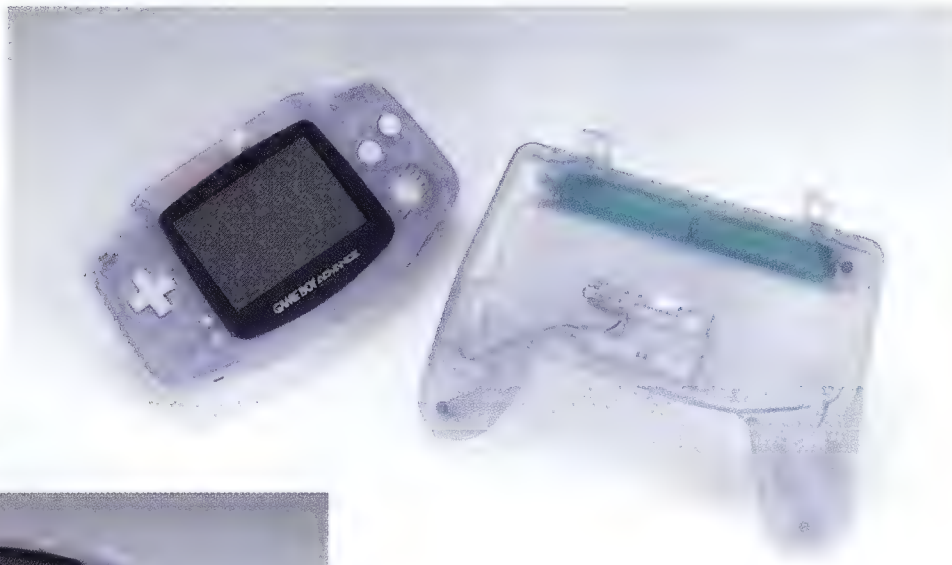
Koto inc./ArtFx FFX license knows no boundaries. Dial them up at www.artfx-kotobukiya.com and scope out all if the new FFX shirts (available in March, $17.99) figures, and other assorted goodies.

AIBO ERS-220

Another issue of PLAY, another aibo. This time, we have, not a cute, bear-like model like last issue's LM series, but the scary, Terminator-ish ERS-220. And this fellow has got it all. It will recognize 75 voice commands, has a pop-up headlight, and a CMOS camera, enabling the machine to take photos of infiltrators to your home. A row of 21 LEDs on its head allows it to communicate various states of mind and emotion, but really serve just to look cool, as this latest aibo certainly does.

SONY
WWW.AIBO.COM
$1500

HAND JOBS



Seldom is an apparatus aimed at the handheld market both functional and affordable but, Cosmo's GBA EZ Power Grip ($11.99 in assorted GBA colors) is definitely an exception. Not only does it hold a charge well (expect a good four hours of service if you have a light that runs off the same juice), but it feels fantastic. It fits snugly, with no free play and makes the GBA feel like a controller. It's perfect for upcoming GameCube games that utilize the GBA link function.

COSMO
WWW.COSMOACC.COM
$11.99-$17.99

Cosmo's GBA Advance Pak gives you a cradle for desktop charging, two batteries that can be charged simultaneously, an AC adapter, and a car adapter, for just 17.99. Basically you'll never be without a charged Pak again, and it comes in all of the standard GBA colors, so you won't look like a dope with clashing GBA accessories. Can you imagine?

DJ MACHINE

Aspiring DJs abound finally have a tool for experimentation. It's inexpensive enough for the basement beatmaker and technically capable of impressing even Paul Oakenfold, so don't be intimidated. Armed with this digital music mixer—basically a pair of portable turntables that plug straight into your USB port—you'd be surprised what a magazine editor with absolutely no rhythm can conduct on a PC. Tinker with a toggle stick to warp your tunes, slide your fingers to pump up the volume—to think, a few pounds of plastic and microchips could allow even the most inefficient, uneducated guy become a garage mixman.

DM 2
WWW.MIXMAN.COM
$99

STATIC ELECTRICITY

A gothic/grunge death metal odyssey set backstage, amid a heavy Stone Temple Pilot chorus and locked inside a latrine.

as told to **ryan pheiffer**

"Due to the extremely intense components involved in its operation, we ask that only qualified and skilled listeners attempt usage of said Machine," chimes the official Static X website. Thus begins a journey through the minds of band members Tony Campos (bass, vocals) and Tripp Rex Eisen (guitars), backstage during the Family Values Tour. The heavy metal group is rowdy in concert—some would say, almost electric—so it was relieving (no pun intended) to see both Tony and Tripp, relaxed and modest, as the tape recorder rolled in a dingy backstage bathroom.

What defines the heavy metal climate?
Tripp: Well, it's very splintered now. There are bands where you can say, "These bands sound like these bands." There's different groupings. Metal's so diverse now. A band like Pantera is metal. Slayer—they're metal. Then you have this new metal, with bands like Mudvayne, Stain'd, your Slipknots, your System of a Downs, your Static Xs. Even though the music is heavy, there's different elements combined with the heavy. Like we have the industrial and techno element in our music.

So why not take the bubblegum pop route?
(Someone knocks on the bathroom door)
Tony: We're filming an interview. Get out.
(The knocker is persistent)
Tripp: One: We're all ugly. Two: None of us can sing. Three: None of us can dance. We just don't write pop tunes.
Tony: No, dude, you can't dance. You're too Italian to dance. (laughs)
Tripp: Back when we started the band that wasn't goin' on then.
Tony: The good ol' days when there weren't any boy bands.
Tripp: The only boy band was New Kids on the Block.
Tony: But they were Old Men on the Block by then.
Tripp: Not when Static X started.
Tony: Yeah, they were done, dude. They were history.

New Kids aside, rumor has it, when you're not on the road, you're all big fans of action figures.
Tony: I collect action figures. Like the McFarlane stuff—the Movie Maniacs. Since I was a kid, I've been a huge anime fan, so I collect all the robot stuff. I'm a big fan of robots. And I've been a big video game freak since I was knee-high. I still have old Atari 2600.

I even pitched in for the Jaguar.
Tony: Oh, you had the Jaguar? A friend of mine bought the Jaguar when it came out. He spent, like, 300 bucks. Oh, he was so pissed. He tried to sell it and he got, like, 15 bucks for it. But, you know, the version of *Doom* on that was really good.
Tripp: Action figures are the biggest thing. [Tony] likes more of the GI Joes. Four things, basically: Superheros, *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Planet of the Apes*. I have every *Star Wars* first-issue figure that came out. *Star Trek*—I have almost the whole series.

So what's the most unglamorous part of the music biz—besides doing interviews in the can?
Tripp: The worst part is your bathroom cycle—not being able to go to the bathroom on the bus.
Tony: You have to plan your bowel moments around your travel.

Charting how much you can drink per hour?
Tony: You can urinate on the bus, you can't defecate.
Tripp: In an extreme emergency, you can hot bag it. You triple bag, wrap it up quick, and dispose of it out the window while the bus is moving—in a remote area.

When the *Behind the Music: Static X* airs, what secrets will spill?
Tripp: No big secrets.
Tony: A lot of video games, and a lot of porn—a *lot* of porno

TINY MUSIC REVIEWS

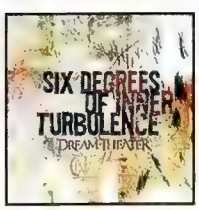
ROB ZOMBIE
THE SINISTER URGE

RZ's V8 is still running on embalming fluid. Laced with retro horror background samples, killer cameos, and thick chafing riffs, The Sinister Urge has range, and undead fun to burn. Play it loud enough in the car and the crows start dancing.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating ●●●●○

DREAM THEATRE
SIX DEGREES OF INNER TURBULENCE



DT take the current rock scene to school with a double CD rock opera the likes we haven't scene since Yes' Tales from Topographic Oceans and Rush's 2112. It's pure brilliance. Close your eyes and watch the movie in your mind.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating ●●●●○

CREED
WEATHERED

Baked with the carefully monitored mix of radio-digestible ingredients and deflated morality conscious rock, this very Creed-like Creed album has just enough flavor to satisfy long-standing fans but not neerly enough soulful creativity to move the rest.

play rating ●●○○○

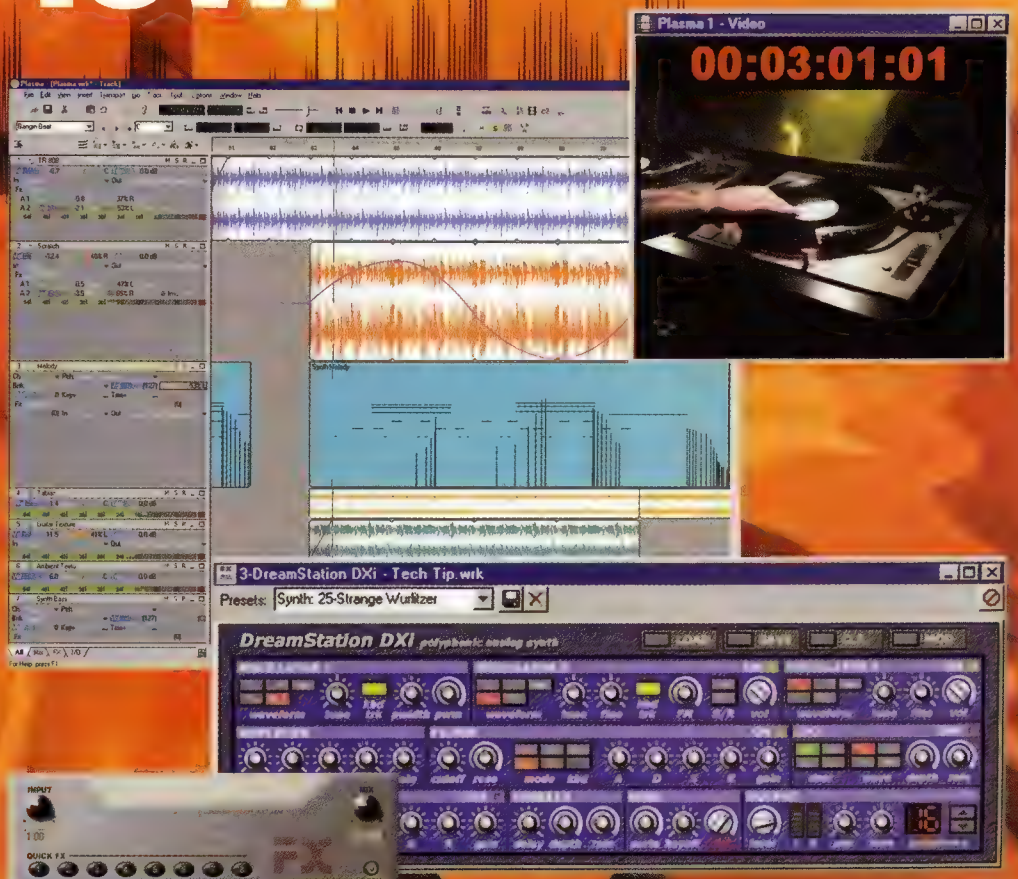
The music's inside you.

Let It Flow.

Don't just play music—play with it. With Plasma, you can tap into your own creative juices, and share them with the world.

No experience required. Just click and drag to build your own grooves. Then add vocals, instruments, samples, or other effects. Even create remixes of your favorite artists, and save them as MP3s, or burn them to CD*.

Plasma has everything you need: easy-to-use looping and remixing tools, tons of loops, a built-in DXi software synthesizer, the Plasma FXPad™, and way more.



Grip This.

The Plasma FXPad turns your PC joystick or mouse into a live DJ multi-FX generator. Just pick an effect, hit Play, and start moving to the music.

Get Flowing.

Plasma is now available at music and computer stores everywhere.
$49 U.S. (estimated retail price)

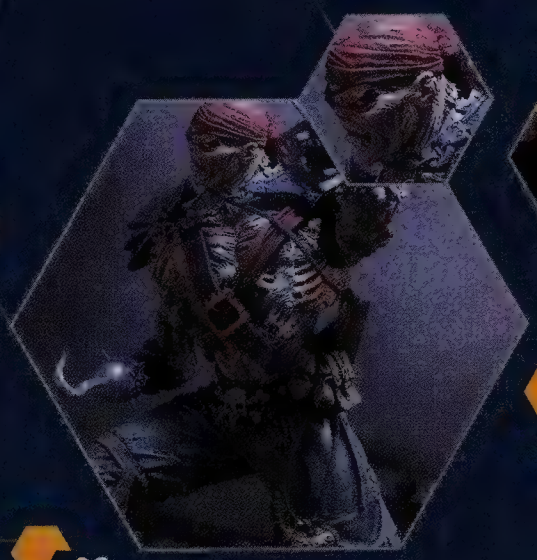
*Plasma includes 30-day trial version of the Cakewalk Pyro MP3/CD maker.

www.cakewalk.com/plasma
888-CAKEWALK

cakewalk®

01
:: WINGS OF REDEMPTION

Spawn with his angel wings. Memo to God: make these harder to get.



02
:: PIRATE SPAWN

Spawn that wishes he knew Renny Harlin. "Where's me close up ya' fleshy bahstuhd!"

03
:: RAVEN SPAWN

Based on the Hellspawn series he's all new. Evil Jesters everywhere beware.

04
:: ALIEN SPAWN II

Paging Mrs. Ryder, Mrs. Winona Ryder.

05
:: SHE SPAWN II

The hottest chick in hell. if you're gonna' burn, might as well have something nice to hold onto.

06
:: SPAWN VII

Bring me anything i can kill. That Conan guy... Yah, I'll kick his ass all the way back to Vallhala!

01
:: LULU FFX

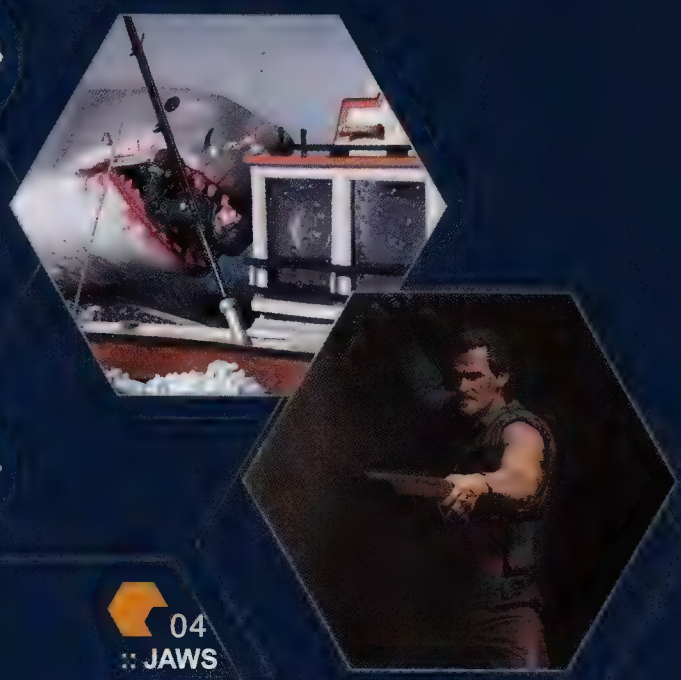
11 inches of soft vinyl never looked so good. Koto Inc./ARTFX' Lulu (FFX) comes with everything you see here! Pre-painted and assembled she's ready to cast a spell on all of your weaker feeble minded toys.

02
:: ET

This Toys 'R Us exclusive ET stands nearly 3 ft. tall and utters authentic phrases from the film as his finger and heart emit a warm red glow. "ET Loves You"...ahhh.

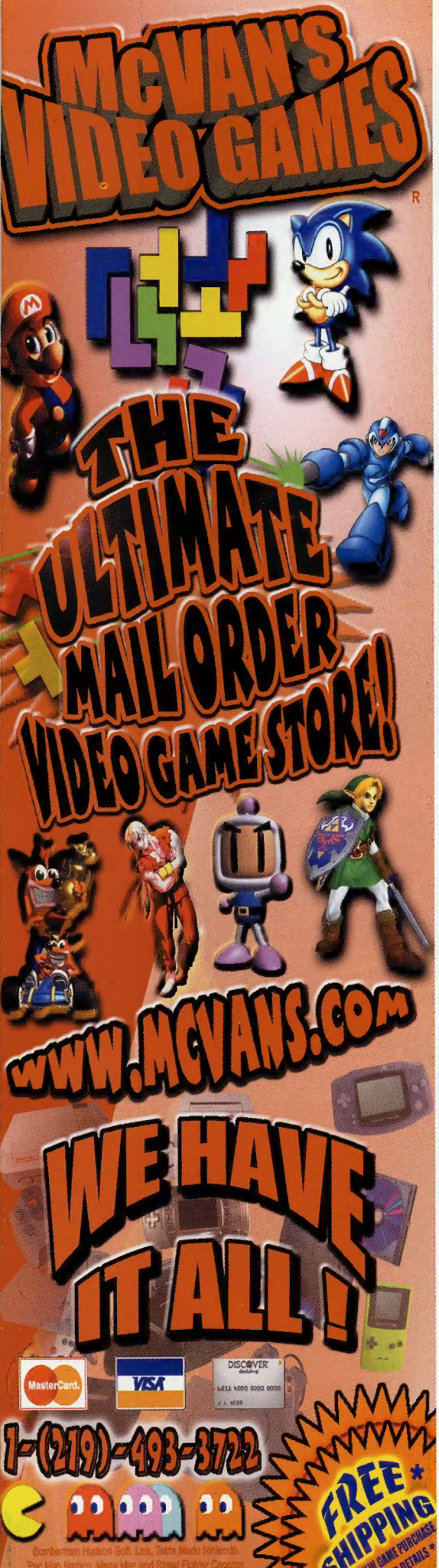
03
:: BBI GOES TO WAR

Coming to a cave near, er, not you, bbi's Navy Seal Night Ops, Seal UDT, and Green Beret stand ready at 12 inches tall. Find out more about these incredibly life like toys at blueboxtoys.com.



04
:: JAWS

It's everyone's favorite amputee-Ash. Fully articulated and armed to the teeth, with motion activated sound he utters such memorable lines as "Well hello Mr. fancy pants" . Groovy. Somebody give him a hand. McFarlanes Jaws toy (pictured above) comes with its own food.



Whether you have questions, criticism, or if you just need to vent or say what's on your mind, write us here at PLAY. It's time to get a major forum going... off-line. Email your queries to:

letters@play-magazine.com

I wondered what had happened after Gamer's Republic... I wonder, can you ever divulge what *really* happened to Diehard GameFan or the parent company? What caused the collapse of that institution? It seems PLAY offers a potentially bigger landscape for you to till. Already, the magazine looks better than GR, although I don't share your enthusiasm for anime, and feel that the mag should be game oriented rather than multi-faceted. It's great to know, however, that you are still doing the good work of bringing words of wisdom to the gamers at large who need to know about the Lady Sia's and the Evil Twin's as much as they do the latest Final Fantasy, Jak & Daxter or Maximo. (BTW, J&D is absolutely brilliant). Although I enjoyed Crash Bandicoot, the character never had the "pizzaz" of Sonic or the gameplay world of Mario. I think with J&D, Naughty Dog has truly made their first masterpiece. A long way from Rings of Power! The mag seems to have more potential than GR did, and the layout is much less cluttered but well balanced with all available space used to good effect. Well, I just wanted to say "Welcome back, 'Storm' and company."

R. Palmer

Quite simply, both mags I've been attached to were parts of a larger hole and were susceptible to the ups and downs of the group. I went through hell at GF—we all did—there was lots of deception, breaks in the ranks, you name it. I'd love to tell the real story, as it's never been portrayed anywhere close to what really went on, but I'd have to write a book, which I've been seriously considering... After 10 years, deep in the industry, I have a lot to say. We've had lots of comments come in regarding the amount of anime coverage in PLAY, mostly good, but some not so good, from gamers like yourself who think we're taking up valuable game space. Truth is, we're actually not, well, we kind of are... Not being confined to cover only games, we're not expected to throw in every last screen and game that comes through the door. So, rather than give you pages and pages of filler—namely screens of far off games accompanied by regurgitated press release info, or simply crap we'd rather just review poorly when it oozes to retail—we butter them with the best the growing anime industry has to offer. Last year, one of every four DVDs released was anime, so it's growing, and well, we love anime! I wish I could have printed your entire letter, but in a nutshell, Red Dog indeed, the new Blaster Master did come out, but was extremely limited (pretty good, though) and you definitely will like Evil Twin. It's a game for pros. It's the newbies, I think, that will get lost in it.

I had emailed you back in the day for advice about trademarks and such in a gaming zine. Thanks for the advice, although college keeps me from pursuing my goal. Just wanted to welcome you guys back to the world of game magazines. My friends and I enjoy the new magazine you're heading up. Though Gamers' Republic will always be missed, we are glad to get something like it (and maybe better?) back. It seemed odd that a magazine would just stop without notice. My friend has a theory that all good game magazines are gonna die and we will be left with console exclusive mags. Even Next Gen is biting the bullet soon.

Fabian L. Manino

Thanks... I think. I promise we're not going to bite the bullet! PLAY is privately held to insure we're around until we can communicate with you all telepathically. There are no crazy "let's build an empire" schemes or IPOs planned for PLAY. We're ecstatic to finally be free from the bureaucracy of investor money. The inmates run this asylum, my friend, so if our readers say they want more of anything in particular—like Britney nude—we can give it to 'em. Of course, advertising is key so be sure and write all of your favorite companies and tell them to run ads in PLAY!! It's sad about Next, we all really liked that magazine. I can't believe it's gone. But I'm sure the staff will all pop up here and there. They're a great bunch. As for college, unless you're dialed in on a major Major, it's buyer beware.

Jordan is back and so are you! I always wondered what happened to the Republic. The great stuff suddenly disappeared. Anyway, I hope you have all been doing well.

Games really have been an escape from the crazy things that happen. I have missed your views and insight on all things cool. What a time for us crazy gamers. There are 4 active systems! Wow... GBA came and took us back to the games we still love. Dreamcast went, and Sega will emerge as the best 3rd party any system could wish to have. Nintendo continues to amaze me and make me feel like a kid every time. The controller is a work of genius. And I can take the thing anywhere. I decided to get an Xbox on the morning it was released. It was easy enough. I just love games, I had to get it. Hell, I've got two of every system and hundreds of import games, but that controller is hideously ugly and BIG! I've got little hands—that thing hurts after a short while... anyway, it is bad.

PS2 continues to be the best deal out of the box... great, great new games. Oh yeah, Panzer on Xbox... that is another reason I bought one. Anyway, I wish you and the crew the best of luck. What a time for us Die Hard Gamers.

Joe Saab
Zero Point Design
A friend since DHGC 1991

Joe! A true Die Hard Gamer! It's great to hear from you. It's crazy where gaming has taken us and the way that it fills our lives. How do people live without them? Poor saps. What we love about the Xbox is the obvious potential. With Halo, Munch's and DOA3 as launch games, imagining the full force of the system is mind boggling. That controller is big though, but it's well made. The import controller is the power. Not only is it smaller, but the black and white buttons are placed underneath the colored ones where you can actually access them. Panzer should be interesting seeing as how Andromeda are no more. But if Valkyrie Profile and Jet Set Future are any indication, Sega is going to make the box rock. As for the Cube, it is a masterwork of design and functionality. My launch party will officially commence with Starfox Adventures and Mario Sunshine...

XBOX

You've never played like this before!

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